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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY, 1966 Vol. 18, No. 3

NEW SUSPENSE COMPLETE NOVEL

THE HUNTED ONES

by JAMES McKIMMEY

Inexorably linked by the dreadful secret they shared, they fled into the hostile night—a fragile girl who knew no evil and a light-lipped boy who knew it intimately and much too well!

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THE HUNTED ONES

A NEW COMPLETE SHORT NOVEL

Too late the tight-lipped fugitive learned the inexorable, grim lesson of his calling—a dealer in death must some day fill one of the graves which he has fashioned!

By JAMES McKIMMEY

SAN LUPE, a sprawling rectangle created by 20,000 citizens, lay under a yellow January sky, cooled by a sea breeze from the coast seven miles away. The boy and girl sat silently in the old convertible on a quiet residential street dominated by a very large white frame house with rococo trim. Into the quiet came the distant sound of the whistle of a train speeding toward Los Angeles eighty miles south. The boy—tall, blond and extremely slim—was looking at the white house. The girl—strikingly pretty, with a fragile, pale face, black hair and very dark eyes—was looking at the boy.

At last she said: "I'm sure it'll be all right, Billy."

"Oh, yes."

"She just wants to talk to you."

He rubbed his chin with long fingers. He was handsome, she thought. He was intelligent, warm and loving. He was twenty-two, six years older than she. He was more than anything she could think of. She could only feel, and know through that, that she loved him. She had felt it from the instant she'd gone into the small truckers' cafe on the highway for a Coke and seen him behind the counter.

He turned to smile at her. It was a fine smile, she thought: an infectious curve of mouth, showing even white teeth, making her heart pump faster and her inner self melt. Oh, God, she thought, I do love him.

"We'd better go in," he said, looking at his watch. "It's four-thirty."

"Yes." She took his hand. "She'll love you, as I do."

His smile widened so that his pale blue eyes crinkled at the corners. "Do I have to love her too, little one?" He saw her bewilderment and bent to kiss her forehead gently. "Pay no attention, Maria Nivero. I will do my best to impress your mother. I will love her. She will love me. And we will all live happily ever after."

He slid from behind the wheel and came around to help her out. They walked toward the large house. She knew, because of the way he had spoken, because of the look of his eyes, that he was very nervous.

The interior of the house was high-ceilinged and furnished sparsely with durable furniture. There was a fireplace in the sprawling living room. Over its mantel was hung a large oil painting of a man in his forties. He had thick, loosely brushed hair, greying faintly at the temples. His face was angular, dark, and strong-looking.

His eyes stared forth unafraid and commanding.

"That was my father," the girl said, then led the youth across the room and down a mahogany-panelled hallway to a closed door. "She wants to see you alone."

"Sure," he smiled, but the smile was no longer easy.

She rapped lightly on the door and opened it. He went in alone.

Elizabeth Nivero's office was awesome in its simplicity. The walls were white plaster and held no pictures. Black beams ran across the ceiling. The floor was stone, and French doors looked out upon a sweeping garden of small palms shadowing a trimmed lawn which was circled by a giant hedge. There was a single gold brocaded chair placed in front of a massive baroque desk. Behind the desk sat Elizabeth Nivero.

Perhaps fifty-five, he thought—extremely small, extremely handsome, with olive skin and white hair. There was authority in her stiff posture and in her black eyes, so piercing and steady that he

stopped midway across the room, feeling her power.

"Sit there," she said in a soft, husky voice that nevertheless carried the force of her personality.

He sat down in the armless gold chair, spotlighted with the pale yellowish light of the late winter afternoon coming through the panes of the French doors. He felt alone and stripped of defence under her steady examination. He waited silently until she spoke:

"Billy Marsh?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"That's what Maria told me. She's sixteen. She has a year and a half more of high school to finish. She's a child."

He started to reply; then he did not.

"All right, Mr. Marsh," she said. "I've known you've been seeing her. Ever since it started, about six weeks ago. You've never come here, have you? You've always met her somewhere else."

Again he did not know what to reply.

"You thought I'd interfere, didn't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She shook her head abruptly. "I'll explain, Mr. Marsh. I have been a widow for a long time. When my husband died, I decided to try to continue with his enterprises. The restaurant—it's one of the largest tourist attractions in this section of the state. You've been in there, haven't you?"

"It's very nice."

"There was also real estate, quite a lot of it. Citrus groves. A half dozen other ventures he'd started. I stayed with it all. It wasn't easy. But I succeeded. I'm sure you know I'm now one of the wealthiest persons in this community?"

"I'd guessed maybe that was a fact."

"All right. Keep giving me straight answers like that."

For the first time, he began to relax. He smiled at her, but she did not return the smile. She removed a cigarette from a pack on her desk and put it between her thin lips. He immediately drew a packet of matches from his shirt pocket. But she lit the cigarette with a flat silver lighter before he could lean forward. He slipped the packet back into his breast pocket, flushing slightly.

"I'll tell you why I haven't interfered," she said dryly. "It's because I decided when Maria was born that I would never allow myself to restrict her freedom. I was forty when she was born, and it wasn't an easy delivery. Because my husband died two months later, Maria was my only child. Nevertheless, I resolved that I would never become overly protective about my daughter. Do you understand, Mr. Marsh?"

He had grown to love Maria

swiftly. She was kind, sweet, humble and devoted to him from the instant they'd met. But he had been very certain that one thing about Maria which might be a fault was the fact that she had obviously been over-protected. But he said: "I think so."

"Then you'll also understand why I wanted you to come here today. It's not that I'm trying to interfere with a twenty-two-year-old man spending so much time with sixteen-year-old daughter. It's not the fact that you happen to be employed as a counterman in that truckers' cafe on the edge of town. It is simply that I feel I have a right to know who you are, where you come from, what you're doing here, and what you intend to do with your life. Since you haven't given me the respect of coming here before now to tell me these things, I've asked you to see me today, so you can. I repeat, Mr. Marsh, I'm not trying to interfere. I'm simply trying to meet my responsibilities as a mother. Am I clear?"

His voice was very quiet. "Yes, ma'am."

"Where do you come from?"

"Los Angeles."

"Did you graduate?"

"Yes. I had a year of college too."

"Where?"

"Pasadena."

"What did you take?"

"Art."

"You want to be an artist?"

"I don't think so. I thought so then. I don't think so now."

"You decided to be a counterman in a truckers' cafe instead?"

Again he flushed faintly. "I just haven't decided yet. I have that job for a living, that's all."

"You're twenty-two years old, but you don't know what you want to do yet. Is that it?"

"Yes," he said softly, feeling resentful.

"Do you love my daughter?"

"Yes." Now his voice had turned firmer. He sat straighter.

"You think you love her."

"I know I do."

"What does your father do?"

"He's dead."

"Your mother?"

"She lives in Los Angeles."

"Does she work?"

"Yes," he said. "Well, I mean—not right now." Her questions were coming fast, and he could feel his palms dampen.

"What do you mean, not right now?"

"I mean she did. She doesn't now."

"How does she live then? You don't make enough to support her, do you?"

"She had insurance, from when my father died."

"He had a good amount of insurance then, didn't he?"

"Yes, ma'am. A pretty good amount."

"What did he do for a living?"

"He was a carpenter."

"You lived in Los Angeles all your life? Then you came here. Why?"

"I just happened to like it here."

"You mean you came through and just happened to like it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Just like that."

"Well—we, I mean, my family and I drove through here once, down from San Francisco, and we—"

She watched him carefully. "Down? Your home was in Los Angeles, I thought."

His face suddenly turned hot. "I mean, yes. But we took this trip *up* to San Francisco. Then we went down, coming back."

"I see." She inhaled, then turned her cigarette out against an ash tray, watching him steadily. "Are you nervous, Mr. Marsh?"

"No," he said swiftly.

"I thought you were. If you were honest about all of this, about your background, and yourself, and this love you say you have for my daughter, then you wouldn't be nervous, would you?"

"No, ma'am I wouldn't be. I'm not."

She continued to stare at him, then she looked down at her desk. She shifted a paper. "All right, Mr. Marsh. I imagine Maria's waiting for you."

"You don't mind then?"

"Mind what, Mr. Marsh?"

"My seeing Maria?"

"Not so long as you handle yourself with complete propriety. Not so long as you be very careful about your intentions. Not so long as you keep everything absolutely in the open. If you get any ideas more serious than you have so far—such as marriage—I'll trust you'll talk to me. Otherwise—" She slid another paper before her eyes. "You may go, Mr. Marsh."

He left the room, shutting the door carefully behind him.

When he left, Elizabeth Nivero lifted her telephone and dialed. A male voice responded: "Sheriff's office."

"Let me speak to Carl Miter, please."

Moments later a hard, nasal voice said, "Miter here."

"Elizabeth, Carl. I'd like to see you, if you have a moment,"

He was there in twelve minutes, tapping gently on her door.

CARL MITER was a bantam-sized man with slightly bowed legs. He wore Levis and a matching denim jacket. He carried a worn black western hat and

moved casually across the stone floor, his dark motorcycle-styled boots clumping.

"It's so good to see you, Carl."

He smiled and took her hand, then sat down on the gold chair, crossing his legs. He looked at her through steel-rimmed glasses with quick, watchful eyes, his lean, pocked face in repose.

"How are the dogs?" she asked.

"Oh, real good. Suzie, that's the hound bitch, she had a touch of poisoning about four weeks ago. Let's see. I haven't seen you for about a month, have I?"

"I don't believe so, Carl."

"Well, she got her teeth into a squirrel too long dead, and she was sick. But Wiggins, the vet, fixed her up. The others, the pointer and the bastard, they're all right too. I get them out running all the time. I got the truck fixed up good now. Place for the dogs. Place for me to sleep. I could go to Alaska and back in that."

"That's very nice. How about your work?"

He nodded agreeably. "Sheriff's deputy is fine with me. I was always grateful you set me up with that."

"You did a lot for me, Carl. I've never thought I've properly repaid you."

"Well, I never did anything in my own mind. You were always doing for me."

"I've told you before. Any time you want to be sheriff, I'll have Case out of there and you in."

"Well, that's too damn much responsibility. What I do now gives me time for my dogs, shooting, banging around the countryside." He studied her carefully, then he said, "Time all around. Including time for doing anything you might want me to do. Like the old days. You've got something now, haven't you?"

Now her eyes lost their warmth. "Have you heard of a Billy Marsh?"

He smiled slowly. "Works out at Rudy's Cafe. Counterman. Came into San Lupe about six months ago. Blond. About six-one. Twenty-one, twenty-two?"

"He's been seeing Maria."

"I wondered how long you'd let that go on."

She drew out another cigarette. Miter leaned forward and lit it for her. She said, "I thought it was something that would die by itself. The one thing I've learned about Maria is that you don't handle her any way but carefully. I've been trying to do that, hoping she'd forget this. But she hasn't. Now I've got to do something about it. But I don't want to make any mistakes."

Miter dusted a palm across a boot. "You want me to handle him?"

"Not unless we have to do it that way. But I want you to check him. I had him in here, question-

ing him. I don't like his looks. I don't like the way he answered. Woman's intuition, perhaps. But I think he's in trouble. He seemed flustered, especially when he was telling me where he came from.

"First he said Los Angeles. Then San Francisco. I'd like you to find out where he really comes from. If you have to travel, do it. Fly, take the train, take your truck. Anything. But track that boy's background down. I think he came here to hide. I think he's an opportunist as far as my daughter is concerned. I want you to handle this for me, Carl. Quickly."

He nodded, eyes glistening behind the steel-rimmed spectacles. "You say it, Elizabeth, I always do it." He grinned and stood up. "Don't you worry now."

"Thank you, Carl," she said, some of the anger fading from her voice. "You're very kind to me."

"Just you don't worry now," he said, and ambled casually from the room.

THE YOUTH rolled his convertible into the drive-in.

"Hamburger and shake?" he said to the girl. She nodded, and he got out to give his order. It was cooler now, the light was fading. A thousand yards away on the bypass cars were speeding north and south on Highway 101. Two hamburgers and two milkshakes were placed in a cardboard holder. The boy carried them back to his car. They sat eating, sipping the milkshakes.

"Aren't you happy, Billy?" the girl said finally.

"Sure."

"It went perfectly, didn't it?"

"Absolutely."

"She didn't object to you. She isn't going to interfere."

"That's what she said."

"Then everything's all right, isn't it?"

He smiled at her. "Everything's always all right, if you want it to be. The world turns rosy, everyone loves each other and we all live in a paradise."

Her young eyes were worried. "Billy, I just don't understand when you talk that way. I love you so much. But sometimes I think it isn't enough, just to love you."

"Love's always enough, little one. Pay no attention. I'm happy. I've met your mother. I've got the day off from work. I was paid two whole weeks' salary yesterday. I'm with you. They make charming hamburgers here, and beautiful milkshakes. What more could I ask?"

He turned on the radio. In a moment soft music came forth. "You see? Lovely music for background. It is a paradise, little one. Never fail to believe it." She looked so vulnerable, he thought. He took her hand gently and said:

"Just think of us, little one. Love your mother. Love the world. But we are all that count." His hand

tightened around hers. "The world's a paradise as long as you keep it that way. People try to make it something else. They come after you, when they're not invited. They try to stop you, every time. Especially when you're young. Why? Why the hell should they do that?" He shook his head angrily. "We're important, aren't we? You and I?" His mouth was tense, his eyes hard. Then he smiled again. "Let's get out of here."

He tossed the empty containers into a refuse can and backed with a high whine. He swung the car around and drove swiftly through the sleepy downtown section. Then he went out of town, down a narrow blacktop, past an orange grove. He turned on the radio full-volume, laughing, and took a sharp turn on to a country road, tires squealing. He finally stopped in the quiet of a small woods, cut the engine and turned the radio down low.

"You really don't understand me, do you, little one?"

"I try."

"Why?"

"Because I love you."

"As simple as that? No strings?"

"No strings."

"Do you love me that way?"

"Yes," he said softly. "I do."

Then all of his worries, tensions, nervousness seemed to disappear. He kissed her carefully and tenderly. He was aware of nothing else for a long number of minutes, until the voice of an announcer broke through the radio music. She did not hear it because she was lost in her love for him. But he heard it, the first words, and got the radio snapped off, because he'd heard all he needed.

Twenty minutes before, Elizabeth Nivero's telephone rang atop her desk. She lifted it to hear: "Carl, Elizabeth. I don't think I'm going to have to make any trips to check that kid."

"Why not?"

"I went through the old teletypes. Should have caught it before. Blame myself. But you get so many of these things. It happened over a year ago. It wasn't hot when he showed up here."

"*What*, Carl?"

"He's from San Francisco, and we just checked the description with them up there on the phone. He's wanted, all right."

She could feel her face stiffen, a small tremor go into her hand holding the telephone. "Maria's with him right now."

Miter said, "His name isn't Marsh. It's Lang. The sheriff's getting everything coordinated right now. Chief of police is exploding his department. I'm going out myself, just as soon as I hang up. We'll have that son of a bitch behind bars in minutes. I'll phone you."

"Carl," she said tensely, "what is he wanted for?"

"A killing."

BILLY LANG heard the truck approaching. Maria was no longer in his arms. She was staring at him, saying, "Billy, what's the matter? You're white."

"Maria, you've got to believe in me. You've *got* to!"

"But I do, Billy."

"No matter what."

"Of course," she said positively.

"Somebody's driving in here," he said. "Whoever it is, if they ask for me, keep their attention. Tell them we ran out of gas, that I walked back toward town."

"Billy—"

But he was out of the car, running. He disappeared behind a tree, just before the pick-up came into view around a curve and skidded to a stop. Carl Miter sat behind the wheel for a few moments; the aluminum housing of the living unit built over the flatbed and cab gleamed softly.

Then he got out, a rifle in one hand. He came toward the convertible.

Maria watched him in surprise. "Carl? What's the matter?"

"Where is he?" Miter wheeled slowly, searching the woods.

"Who?"

"Billy-boy."

"We—ran out of gas. He walked back toward town."

Miter's eyes switched to look at the radio; it was silent.

"What's the matter, Carl? Is something wrong?"

"Yeah," Miter nodded. "A lot, I'd say."

Now she saw Billy coming from the trees, loping with high speed toward Carl Miter, who was faced away from him. Miter saw her eyes looking beyond him. He turned. But before he was halfway around, Billy's hand sliced flatly against his neck.

Miter grunted and tried to bring up the rifle.

But the boy hit him again, with a closed fist. The rifle went out of Miter's hands and his legs loosened, his eyes glazed. Again a fist came up in a long, looping arc; there was a dull crack as it struck Miter's jaw. Miter tumbled heavily to the ground and lay motionless.

"Billy!" the girl said. "What's happening?"

"Stay there," he snapped. He emptied the ammunition from the rifle, then swung it by the barrel against a tree trunk, smashing the stock. He ran to the pick-up, jerked the keys from the ignition and threw them into the brush.

Then he ran back to the convertible, vaulted in and started the car. He left the woods with a roar.

"Billy—?" the girl began.

"No questions," he said. "Not now. You've just got to believe in me. Will you?" His blond hair was tumbled over his forehead, as he bent against the steering wheel. "Maria, will you? *Please.* I love you!"

"Yes," she whispered, eyes frightened, her hands held tightly together. "Anywhere. With you, Billy!"

THE SHERIFF'S office was neat and well arranged. There were metal files, a gun cabinet, a map of the county on a wall. The sheriff sat behind a large metal desk. His name was Monty Case. He was a large man with a fleshy, pleasant face, dressed neatly in a lightweight suit. Elizabeth Nivero sat stiffly in a straight-back chair, watching him. Carl Miter stood to her right, eyes savage behind his glasses. His left cheekbone was bruised; there was a small piece of tape on his chin.

"I'm sorry, Elizabeth," the sheriff said.

"It was my fault," Miter said coldly. "I never should have—"

"Don't blame yourself, Carl," she said. "You found him anyway."

"That was simple enough. They always went to that drive-in. Then out to where every other young couple parks. But he must have heard something on the radio. If that reporter hadn't got hold of it. And if I hadn't—"

"I said," she repeated sharply, "don't blame yourself."

"That's right," Sheriff Case said smoothly. "No use looking back. All that counts now is that we find them." He swiveled in his chair and lifted a large hand toward the map hanging behind his desk. He drew an imaginary circle around the area surrounding San Lupe. "We've got every main road plugged. How far can they go?"

"You mean," Elizabeth Nivero said, "if they didn't get through before you got those roads blocked." She looked up at Miter. "How long were you out, Carl?"

"Not long, But he got rid of the keys to the truck. That's what took the time, getting a ride to where I could phone in."

"I don't think they got out," the sheriff said.

"But it's possible, isn't it?" Mrs. Nivero said. "He could have abandoned his car, stolen another? We don't know, do we? He could be on his way up the coast right now. With Maria."

"I don't think so," the sheriff said. "But—" He shrugged.

"Do you have his parents' address in San Francisco?" she asked.

"Yes," the sheriff nodded.

"I'd like to have Carl for a while," she said. She looked again at the tough, pocked face of Carl

Miter. "We'll take the truck. With the dogs."

"Elizabeth," the sheriff said, "we're doing everything humanly possible."

"May I have Carl?" she said.

"Yes, of course. But—"

"This is my daughter he's kidnapped!" she said harshly.

"All right. Any way you want to do it." He looked at Miter. Take care of her. And be awful careful."

Carl Miter stared across the room at the map. "The next time I find him, he isn't going to—" His words trailed away in anger. He looked down at Mrs. Nivero, blinking, finding his control again. "Don't you worry, Elizabeth. You and me, we'll take the truck and dogs and guns. We'll find him, wherever he went. Maria's going to be all right. And that—"

He shook his head, eyes shining with anger again. He could not find his voice for several moments, but finally he did and said, "We'll take care of him."

In San Francisco the air had turned chill. The sun had set and darkness was coming fast. Home going drivers rolled bumper to bumper up the incline of Twin Peaks. At the top, occupants of a half dozen parked cars were watching the lights of the city turning on. Down the east side of the hill a station wagon came to a stop in front of one of several neat white houses built only inches apart. The driver, a strong-looking, rather short man, reached in back and picked up a newspaper and a six-pack of beer from a collection of fishing gear. He got out of the car, moving with the natural ease of an athlete.

He was climbing the steep stairway to his door when a voice stopped him. He turned and looked at two men crossing the street from a police car. He felt the apprehension immediately.

The taller of the two led the way up the steps and said, "Ernest Lang?"

"That's right."

"I'm Inspector Ford. This is Assistant Inspector Johnson. We missed you where you work. We talked to your wife on the phone. She said you ought to be along about now."

Ernie Lang rubbed his chin with the back of a hand. "I'm not in trouble, am I?"

"Not you."

"Billy?" he said softly.

"We'd like to come in, if you don't mind."

Ernie Lang's powerful shoulders shifted. "All right." He motioned them into a quiet, somber interior.

A woman rose slowly from a chair. Ernie Lang smiled at her. Her shoulders were slumped wearily; she looked, he thought, older than her forty-four years. He somehow had not noticed that before. Her greying hair was neatly arranged. Her flowered dress was

one she had bought only last week, and it looked nice on her.

But she was tired, he thought—maybe tired of everything, including him. But now it was Billy again.

"This is Inspector Ford and Assistant Inspector Johnson, Anna," he said. "My wife, Mrs. Lang."

"How do you do?" the inspector said. "We talked on the phone, I think."

"Yes," Anna Lang nodded. "Please sit down, won't you?"

They all seated themselves in the old, comfortable living room; and Ernie Lang said, "Did you find him?"

The inspector's voice was crisp. "He turned up down the coast in San Lupe. He's been working down there for the last six months in a truck cafe. He was using another name—Marsh. About six weeks ago he started going with a young girl down there. The girl's mother, a Mrs. Nivero, finally got suspicious. I gather she's one of the important people there.

"She had the sheriff's office check and a deputy ran into an old teletype on your son. He tried to pick him up. The boy was parked in a woods with the girl. He disarmed the deputy, knocked him out and took off. That happened this afternoon. The sheriff's office phoned that up to us. So the boy's with the girl. We don't know where. We'd like to. Has he contacted you, Mr. Lang?"

Ernie Lang shook his head, meeting the inspector's steady gaze. "No."

The inspector nodded. "If he does, you'll let us know?"

"Yes, of course."

"There's an APB on him. But it won't concern us unless he shows up here. He might do that, you know. So I'd like to know all I can. I wasn't familiar with his case, and I haven't had too much time to check it. A robbery and a shooting, wasn't it? A little over a year ago?"

Ernie looked down where he had placed the beer carton. The beer was warming now, and there was going to be no relaxation this evening. "That's right. He and another boy, Pete Howells, were accused of robbing a bar on Noe Street. Billy was driving his car. He parked in front of this bar. It was a Monday night. There weren't any customers in the place, just the owner at the bar. The Howells boy went in and showed a gun. He took a hundred dollars. Then he ran out. The owner had his own pistol under the bar. He picked it up and went to the door and fired after Howells. Apparently that's what happened, anyway. Howells was wounded, but the owner was hit in return. He died before anyone got to him—"

The inspector waited politely, then he said, "And the boys?"

"They both went home. We didn't know what had happened at

first. But the Howells boy had been hit. I guess he didn't know how seriously until he got home. He finally told his parents. They phoned us. I talked to Billy in his room. He said it had all been Howells' idea. He said Howells just told him he wanted to buy some cigarettes in the bar and to wait for him. Then he came out running. The owner followed and started shooting. The Howells boy fired back and Billy drove off. He said he had no idea the Howells boy was armed or intended to rob the place. I believed him. I still do."

"Apparently he didn't think anybody else would."

"No," Ernie Lang said quietly. "I told him we'd have to phone the police. He said he wanted to get dressed and asked me to do it. I left him in his room. When I got back, he was gone through a window."

"And the Howells boy had another story?"

"Yes. He was taken to a hospital. He said he'd never intended to use the gun. He said he and Billy had just wanted a little money. They'd planned it together, he said. But when he came running out, and the owner fired, Billy grabbed the gun and fired back. He wasn't talking too straight, when he told the story. He was hurt pretty badly, running a high fever. Then—he died."

"That's the way it hung up?"

"Yes."

"He's been gone about a year and you haven't heard from him in that time?"

"Not until now, through you." He took a breath. "The girl. He didn't—kidnap her?"

The inspector shrugged. "The mother thinks that. But she's emotional about it, naturally. It's a good possibility the girl's going along because she wants to."

Ernie Lang nodded and was silent.

"Just so I'm a little more clear all around," the inspector said. "Your son had a juvenile-court record?"

"Yes."

"Starting?"

"When he was about fourteen. He apparently took some things. Stuff from stores, nothing worth anything, really. Then they said he stole a car. Ran it around for about two hours, then left it. It was wrong, of course." He shook his head. "He was always sensitive, intelligent. He wanted to be an artist for a while. He had a year of college, at State. Then he lost interest. I don't know. He took everything to heart. Then he'd react.

"Somebody would say something to him, maybe not even mean any disrespect. But he'd take it that way. I think that's why he got into trouble. It was a way of hitting back. But I never understood what he was hitting back at." He looked across the room at his wife. She sat silently, seeming to

look at nothing. "I guess this is my fault, somehow. But—"

"*Our* fault," his wife finally said.

"Well, I'm sorry about this, Mrs. Lang," the inspector said. "Digging into all of this again. It's your son, after all."

"No," she said.

The inspector looked at her curiously.

"Billy's mother died in childbirth," she said. "Mr. Lang and I were married afterward. I always tried to act like his mother. But I wasn't, really."

"Well, I think I'm brought up on it, anyway." The inspector stood up, and his assistant got up with him. "If he should try to contact you—"

"I'll let you know," Ernie Lang said. "This running isn't doing him any good. I know that. I don't think he fired that gun and killed that bar owner. They got the pistol, you know. But they couldn't get fingerprints off it. There wasn't any evidence that he did it. He just shouldn't have run away."

"You're a superintendent in a printing shop, Mr. Lang?"

"Yes."

"That's a good job, isn't it? You have a nice house here. He seemed to have had a very good home."

"We tried to give him that."

"Well, sometimes you never know what it is that makes any kid do what he does. But I agree with you. Running isn't going to help him. I hope we can stop him. Or that he stops himself. Let's hope for that, anyway."

"Yes," Ernie Lang said. "Let's hope for that."

AN HOUR before, Billy Lang stopped the convertible. He had driven inland, using country roads, then doubled back, toward the coast. Now they were in rocky coastal country, parked on a road little more than a path. Trees were thick, bent by a sea wind. There was a small stream running below. Billy opened the glove compartment and drew out a service-station map. It was five minutes before five; there was enough light left to read the map.

"About fifty miles north of San Lupe," he said softly. "A mile from some town called Tiller. Then Dunston up the line, about another mile." He looked around. The surface of the ground was pure rock which sheared off abruptly, down to the creek running below. "They figure we're winging out of here." He shook his head. "Not yet."

"Billy—" the girl said.

He looked at her. Then he smiled. "Now don't worry. It's going to be all right."

"Tell me what happened, Billy."

"I will." He took her in his arms and held her tightly. "But I've got to figure this out first. If I don't, it's over. And that means it's over for us. Don't you see that?"

"I'm trying."

"You've got to believe me. There won't be any more, if they catch us. Do you want that?"

"No!" she said swiftly.

"Then believe in me, little one."

In San Francisco Ernie Lang looked at his watch. "I think there's time for me to get on a train this evening. I'll see if I can get a reservation. I'm going down to San Lupe."

"I'll phone for you," Anna said. "Coach?"

"Yes, sure. I won't sleep."

"You shower while I do it. I'll pack for you."

"Thanks, Anna. Just a couple of shirts. I have to get down there, that's all."

When he'd come out of the shower, she said, "You've got a reservation. There isn't much time. I'll go with you to the train, then drive back."

Fifteen minutes later he was driving down Twin Peaks. His wife sat silently beside him. Finally he said: "Whose fault was it anyway, Anna?"

She shook her head slowly. "Fate?"

"I've never believed too much in that. People make their own way, don't they?"

"Not always."

"I tried with him."

"I know that."

"But I never got to him. He was always—"

"In awe of you," she said.

"But *why?*"

"Because you were everything he wasn't. Capable. Strong. Reliable."

"Well, he was strong too. He'd have been a fine athlete, if he'd put his mind to it."

"I don't mean an athletic kind of strength. I mean just what you said—he could never put his mind to it and keep it there. You always could. You were always the strong rock. Billy wasn't."

"I love that boy."

"I know," she said quietly.

"Now, Anna. I didn't mean it that way. That he was all I loved. You and I—"

"Oh, yes. You and I. Maybe this isn't the time to say it. But I'm going to, anyway."

"I've always been loyal to you, Anna."

"I know that. But love?" She shook her head. "You loved Bea. I was just her roommate. Bea was the pretty one. The boys always loved Bea, including you. But not Anna."

"Don't talk that way."

"When you married Bea and she died giving you Billy, you felt you had to turn to me, didn't you?"

"Damn it," he said, flushing. "You don't have to—"

"You wanted a mother for him. I was it."

"Anna," he said harshly—

"I knew, all along, that it was really Billy that made you marry me. I tried not to think of it, Ernie. I tried to be the best mother I could. But maybe underneath I resented it—being what I was, for the reason I was. And I couldn't have children myself. So maybe it came out, somehow. So that Billy was the—"

"Damn it, Anna. You're talking too much."

"I'm sorry. I'm done now."

They were approaching the station. He stopped the car and turned to her. She smiled at him sadly and said:

"I don't want you to punish yourself. Don't, Ernie. Just go down there, do what you can, the best way you can. I'll phone the plant for you in the morning. I love him too, you know. Be careful. Call me, won't you?"

"Yes," he said softly. "And you be careful driving home."

"I will."

"If Billy should—"

She nodded. "I'll tell him where you are."

He sat looking at her for a moment longer, then he kissed her, clumsily, and was out of the station wagon with his bag. He moved toward the station, a wide, strong, graceful man who looked as though he were bearing more burden than he should.

BILLY LEFT the girl in the car and walked across the fields to the small town named Tiller. The air was cooling rapidly. He moved fast, checking his watch. He stopped at the outskirts, standing on a knoll. The highway by-passed the town, to his right. The main street offered a dozen stores. He could see them from where he stood. At the far end was a surplus store with a gaudy red and black sign announcing the fact. There was a five-and-ten midway down the block. He rubbed his jaw. They'd broadcast their descriptions everywhere by now, he was certain, but this was a chance he had to take.

He walked down the knoll and into the town.

He went swiftly down the street to the surplus store. The owner was short and heavy, with a fringe of grey hair around an otherwise bald head. "Yes, sir?"

"Those jackets over there. How much?"

"Honest-to-God Army fatigue jackets. I'd say I was maybe the only place in the state, maybe in the country, that's got those kind of jackets."

He followed the man across the store. He bought a jacket; he also bought a second-hand civilian hat: a grey snap-brim. While he was waiting for change, the owner said, "Staying in town, or just heading through?"

"Heading through," Billy said. "I've been hitchhiking. But the luck isn't so good. There's not a bus station here, is there?"

"The nearest station's over at Dunston. Next town up."

He put on the jacket and hat and returned up the block to the dime store. It was 5:25. A lone girl was checking receipts at the front when he came in. It was a self-service store, and the girl glanced up at him, then at the clock above the door. She looked annoyed.

He walked through a metal turnstile and moved casually, searching the counters. He glanced back at the girl when he reached the cosmetics section. She was engrossed in her counting. He found a bottle of red hair dye and slipped it into a jacket pocket. There was a display of kerchiefs. He took one and slid that into a pocket. He checked the girl in front again. She had not looked up. He neared a display of eye glasses. He touched them idly, until he found a pair that seemed to have no correction. They followed the dye and the kerchief.

The hands on a wall clock read 5:30. The girl called back, "Closing time."

He removed a cardboard suitcase from a shelf and walked toward the front. He put the case on the check-out counter.

"That's all?" the girl said, fingers hovering over the register keys.

"That's all," Billy said.

Minutes later he was returning through the fields.

On the highway, moving north, the pick-up kept an even speed under the pressure of Carl Miter's boot. "You want to go all the way to San Francisco then?"

"That's where his parents are, aren't they?" Elizabeth Nivero said.

"Maybe he isn't headed that way."

"He's a coward. He'll want help. I think he'll run for home. If he doesn't and we get reports of where he did go, then we'll go that way."

Carl Miter nodded. "Comfortable?"

"I'm comfortable, Carl."

"Hungry?"

"No."

"Well, you will be pretty soon. We'll stop along the line somewhere. I want to feed the dogs then too."

"All right."

"Don't you think too much now. You just sit there and try to ease up a little. This may take a little time."

"He's got Maria, Carl."

"Well, I know that, Elizabeth. And nobody wants him any more than I do. But we've got to be patient and know we'll get him sooner or later."

"When it happens, Carl, you'll know what to do won't you?"

"Yes," he nodded, hands tightening on the steering wheel, "I'll know what to do."

IT WAS almost dark when Billy reached the convertible. The girl turned swiftly, saw him in the fading light, and held out her arms to him. He got in and held her. "That's done. We'll have to wait for a little while. Then we're going to walk to the next town. Are you cold?"

"Not now," she whispered.

"Good," he said softly, breathing the clean fragrance of her hair. "Maria—I'll tell you now. About what happened."

"Yes, Billy."

He told her, the way he'd told it to his father. When he'd finished, she said: "But you didn't do anything, did you? I mean, it was the other boy."

"Yes! I didn't know why he went in there. When he came out, and that fellow started shooting, it was Pete that had that pistol and shot back. I didn't know what was happening. I panicked. I took him home. Then I went home. When my dad found it out, I ran. What else could I do? Maybe it wasn't right. But when I read that Pete died, I knew I couldn't go back.

"I had to keep hiding, because how could I prove anything? The owner of that bar was dead. Pete was dead. Who'd believe me? So I finally came to San Lupe. I thought it was going to be all right. People forget. Only then I heard it on the radio, while we were parked in the woods. They found out who I was. And that fellow came driving in and got out of his truck with a rifle."

The girl watched him with large eyes. "Carl. He works for the sheriff."

"Yeah."

She shook her head, bewildered. "But how did he know?"

"Your mother," he said coldly. "When she questioned me, I made some mistakes. She probably called the sheriff."

"But, Billy, if you really didn't do anything, wouldn't it be better to give up?"

His hands closed tightly on her arms. He stared at her with angry eyes. "Then what? Do you think anybody's going to believe me? I ran around in this neighborhood, when I was a kid. There was always trouble. And who did they go after? Billy Lang. Every time. They never would listen to the

truth. Oh, that was small stuff. But I was never guilty of anything, any more than I am now.

"But this isn't small stuff. This is a murder, and they want me for it. And so what happens if I give up? I'll tell you. It won't matter that I didn't do it. Because they have to have somebody. And I'm the one. And what'll happen then is that there won't be anything left of you and me. Do you want that?"

"Oh, no, Billy," she whispered.

He put his arm around her again. "Then we've got to run. Pretty soon, it'll die down. We'll find a place to live. We'll be together. What more could we ask?"

"Nothing, Billy. That's all I want. Ever."

"Good," he said gently, smiling now. "Grand."

They walked in the dark to the town called Dunston. Maria was wearing light, thin-soled shoes, and her legs were scratched by the brush. But they made it finally to the outskirts, and Billy knew he'd handled the car all right. Before they'd left, he'd released the handbrake and let it roll down the cliff into the trees near the small creek below. It had made some noise, crashing. But nobody had heard that, he was sure, and who was going to look for that car there?

She was shivering with cold when they stopped, looking at the lights of the village ahead. A chill breeze had come up now. He should, he thought, give her the fatigue jacket. But the jacket was to help fool them, and he couldn't.

There was a small shed a hundred yards behind a house at the edge of town. He waited to hear if a dog barked, but there was no sound. He directed her into the shed. In the dark, he kissed her and whispered, "Wait here. I won't be long."

Then he moved on, into town.

Street lamps reflected the moisture in the air, so that a halo circled each one. Billy looked down the central avenue. Most of the shop windows were lighted, but the stores were closed. Open were two bars, the waiting room of the bus station, and what he was looking for: a small, cheap-looking hotel midway down the block. He was wearing the Army jacket, the hat, the glasses and carrying the cardboard suitcase. He strode down the sidewalk toward the hotel and looked at the lobby from the street.

It was ancient and small. A clerk wearing a light, checked sports jacket with wide lapels bent over the desk, reading a paperback. There were two tattered-looking chairs in front of the desk. What appeared to be a self-operating elevator was just beyond. Opposite that, further back in the lobby, was a narrow stairway. The lobby opened to a short hallway, which led to an alley. He walked in.

The clerk looked up without interest. Billy smiled and said, "Chilly tonight, isn't it?"

"It isn't raining, anyway."

"That helps." He put the suitcase down. "When you're hitchhiking."

"Tough way to travel," the clerk said.

"Depends on the drivers." He smiled again. "Better than the Army, anyway."

"Just get out?"

Billy nodded. "Figured I'd save a little money, using the thumb. Have you got a room for not too much?"

"Five dollars the cheapest."

Billy shrugged. "I'll take it."

The clerk tapped the registry, stifling a yawn. Billy signed, "John Morgan, 2252 Noriega, Watsonville." The clerk slid a key to him across the desk. "Second floor. Turn right from the elevator."

"Sure," Billy said. "Only I'm going to get myself a beer first."

The clerk had returned to his reading before Billy reached the street. He moved back in the direction of where Maria waited in the shed. He saw a single Los Angeles newspaper left in a rack on the way. He put it inside his jacket. Then he went back to Maria.

They left the shed and traveled through the town on near-deserted streets. When they reached the alley which ran back of the hotel, he guided her into the shadows. "The back entrance is right up there, where that little light is. I'll go around to the front now. You can see the desk from the back. Give me about two minutes, then open that door a crack. When I move my hand like this, go in and up those stairs. Here's the key. You all right?"

"Yes," she said softly.

Then he was gone.

She went down the alley to the door and waited, shivering with the cold. Her throat felt scratchy, and her heart was beating fast. She kept thinking of her mother, how she'd never really disobeyed her about anything important before in her life. And she could hear her mother's voice right now, ordering her to give this up and come home.

She stood there, her back against the brick of the building. Down the block she could hear the laughter of men drinking in a tavern. The alley was dirty, littered with empty boxes and garbage cans.

She turned and opened the door a fraction, and saw that Billy had entered the lobby and was talking now to the clerk. He pointed outside to the main street, so that the clerk was looking away from the back. He made a motion with his other hand, and she went in.

She ran lightly to the stairway and up the steps. There was a worn rug runner. Someone had scratched on the wall an obscene word that careless cleaning had not removed. There was a smell of age

and old men and cheap wine, and she moved quickly to leave it. She went down the hall, inserted the key into a lock, and stepped into the room, shutting the door against all of that.

But she had not left it. She switched on the bare bulb in the ceiling, whose dimness could not hide the fact that the room, with an iron-framed bed and a worn easy chair, was as tawdry as every other part of the hotel. She walked slowly to the bed and sat down. Love, she thought again.

He came up seconds behind her. He locked the door behind him. His face looked tense. He examined the room swiftly. "This'll be all right. You did great." He drew out the newspaper he'd picked up earlier and scanned the front page. Then he opened the pages, one after another. On the eighth page he found it: a short story; there was no picture. His eyes narrowed as he read, then he slammed the newspaper into a rusting wastebasket.

"Is it about us?" she asked.

"They never tell the truth. Never!"

"Billy—"

Suddenly his face softened. He smiled at her, and that smile made her forget everything else. "Listen," he said, "I'm sorry. It's just —" He walked to her, lifted her gently to her feet. "It's no good for you. I know that. But it'll be all right pretty soon. I swear it."

"But what are we going to do, Billy? Where are we going?"

"I've got an idea. I've been thinking about it. My dad. I mean, he's really something. He believed me about what happened. I know that. Oh, he wanted me to turn myself in. But he didn't understand how it was then. He will now. See, they're saying things, in that newspaper, and probably in the others too. Like you don't want to be with me. Like I forced you. That isn't true, is it?"

"No, Billy."

"Well, you see? But that's how it gets, and my dad'll understand. We're heading north tomorrow. We'll go up to San Francisco, on the bus. We can make it. Then I'll call my dad. He'll help us, because he'll understand how it is." He opened the cardboard suitcase. "See? I got this hair dye in that other town. That's for you. And this kerchief. We'll get on that bus separately. And nobody'll recognize us. When we get to San Francisco I'll call my dad."

She nodded slowly. "Whatever you say, Billy."

He came back to her. "Tomorrow morning, early, you use that dye. We'll pick up a new dress somewhere here for you, and a sweater. You ought to have a sweater, so you don't catch cold. Then we'll get on that bus. They won't stop us. I promise you." He was holding her again, tightly, and she lifted her face to him.

He kissed her as tenderly as he always had. Somehow, from the start, he'd never taken advantage of her. She would have let him, he was certain of that. And he'd wanted to. Yet something—her vulnerability, he thought—had stopped him each time.

But now they were more alone than they'd ever been before. They were in a hotel, weren't they? She'd come with him willingly, because she loved him. And he loved her too, didn't he? And why stop anything now, he thought, his emotions taking control.

"Billy," she whispered. "No—"

He looked down at her and felt a flush as he saw the panic in her eyes. She said, "I love you. But this room. I—"

"I'm sorry, Maria," he whispered. "I was a damn fool. You get some sleep. You must be worn out by now. I'll turn the light out. You just relax, because everything's going to be all right."

"Do you understand, Billy?" she asked.

"Absolutely. I'll sleep in that chair over there. You'll be fine and I'll be fine, and don't you worry about anything. It's going to be the way you want it, little one. I promise you that."

ERNIE LANG stepped off the train in San Lupe at 7:30 the next morning. A morning fog had cooled the town to a chilly wetness. He walked to a cab and said to the driver, "Do you know a Mrs. Nivero?"

"Sure."

"Can you take me to her house?"

The cabbie shrugged. Ernie got in, and the cab moved down the street.

"You know what happened, don't you?" the driver asked.

"I know."

The driver was silent for three blocks, then he said, "Cop?"

Ernie Lang did not answer. The driver shrugged again. Three minutes later he stopped the cab in front of the large white house.

Ernie paid his fare and got out with his suitcase. An olive-skinned gardener was trimming a hedge near the front porch. Ernie said, "Is Mrs. Nivero in?"

"No, *senor.*"

"Do you know when she'll be back?"

"No."

"I'm Billy Lang's father," he said.

The man studied him. "She wouldn't be happy to see you anyway, *senor.*"

"Perhaps not. But I have the same interest she does."

The gardener nodded. "Maybe you should talk to the sheriff."

"Where do I find him?"

"Down the street, to the right. Eight blocks, then right again, and another two. It's a long walk, with the bag. But it kills some time. He won't be in until maybe eight."

Ernie Lang walked the ten blocks to the sheriff's office, carrying his bag easily. A deputy told him to wait in the outer room. He sat listening to a woman delivering reports to cruising patrol cars. At two minutes after eight, a fleshy, neatly dressed man came in through the front. The deputy spoke to him in a low voice.

The sheriff came over and said, "Sheriff Case, Mr. Lang. Would you like to come into my office?"

He led him into the office and said, "Sit down, please."

Ernie Lang put his suitcase down beside the chair and sat down. The sheriff eased himself into his own chair. He looked weary.

"Any word?" Ernie asked.

The sheriff shook his head. "We-'re working, but, no—nothing. Why did you come down, Mr. Lang?"

"I had to do something. It was all I could think of."

The sheriff nodded and then was silent. Finally he said, "What kind of a kid is he?"

Ernie looked beyond the sheriff, through a window which faced the neat shrubs and trimmed palms in front of the building. How many times had he asked himself that question? And what had he determined? Only that he really didn't know. He simply knew that Billy was his son, and that he loved the boy.

"I guess I don't really know, Sheriff," he said honestly. "I

mean, at first, he's just a boy. Then all of a sudden he's thirteen, fourteen. What you thought was just an uncomplicated kid turns into something else. A mask comes down. You're not sure any more."

"Well," the sheriff said, "I've got two of my own. I'm not so sure I know what makes them tick anymore." He got out a cigar from a shirt pocket and twirled it slowly in his hands. "I talked on the telephone to San Francisco last night with Inspector Ford, after he'd talked to you and your wife. I guess I've got the story."

"I told him all I could."

"You don't think he did that shooting, Mr. Lang?"

"No," Ernie said quickly. "I don't think he did."

"You don't think he's dangerous?"

"We're all human, aren't we? That makes us all dangerous, doesn't it?"

"We don't all get into this kind of trouble, Mr. Lang."

Ernie could feel himself tensing.

"Sometimes there's luck—the way it goes."

"The point is simple, Mr. Lang," the sheriff said. "I want to know what we're up against. Aside from that shooting, has he ever been violent?"

"Violent?"

"Has he got a temper?"

"Well, yes."

"He can blow pretty good, in other words."

"He has, I suppose. But—"

"Did he ever hurt anybody, not mentioning that shooting?"

The anger was coming now, but he fought it. "I don't know about that. A few fights, yes. Maybe somebody got hurt. But—"

"He never assaulted anyone as far as you know?"

"Not without provocation. I mean, if you're implying that he stood around in dark alleys and leaped out at people—"

"I'm just trying to get this straight, Mr. Lang. I've got a deputy, Carl Miter. He trailed the boy around town when we knew he was wanted. He figured he was out in this parking spot. The kid was. He worked Miter over pretty good and pretty fast. Miter never knew what hit him. And he's no pushover."

"Billy was probably scared. Sure, he learned how to brawl on the streets. He's coordinated and fast. I'm sorry it happened."

"I'm not blaming you, Mr. Lang. I'm just saying that we want your son, and pretty badly. He's got the girl with him."

Ernie shook his head. "I can't believe he'd force a girl to go with him, if she didn't want to go. He's made some mistakes, but I don't think he'd make that kind."

"I don't think so either," the sheriff said. "I think the girl's in love with him. I think she's going along because she wants to. But that doesn't help anything. It sure as hell doesn't help her mother."

"I can understand that. I went to see her. I wanted her to understand that I'm just as anxious as she is to see this thing stopped. But she wasn't there."

"No," the sheriff said. "She's not there."

He looked at the sheriff, caught by the sharp tone of his voice.

"You may as well know, Mr. Lang. Mrs. Nivero isn't a woman to sit still over a thing like this. She and Miter, the deputy, took off last night in Miter's truck. That truck's equipped for traveling, and Miter's carrying three hunting dogs and enough guns to supply an infantry squad. They're headed your way. They're looking for your son, Mr. Lang."

Ernie's face was hot with anger. "Who the hell is this Miter? Doesn't he believe in the rest of the law in this state? How come he's taking it on himself this way? Aren't there country jurisdictions anyway, so that—"

"Take it easy, Mr. Lang. Would

you like a cigar?" Case extended the cigar he'd been twirling. Ernie shook his head. The sheriff sliced the end off with a cutter from his desk, then lit it slowly. When he saw that Ernie was in control again, he said:

"Elizabeth Nivero's the big power in this community. Her husband died right after Maria was born. He'd started a lot of things. Elizabeth decided to finish them. There were some tough interests around here, and she had to defend herself. Sometimes she had to step on people, to keep moving. She did it through Carl Miter."

The sheriff puffed on the cigar, then said: "I'm not saying there was ever any proof that Miter was responsible for a broken head here and there. But we all knew that was the way it was. Miter's been her muscle man, in other words. I tell you honestly, because that's the way I've always handled this job. Elizabeth Nivero could have me out of here with the snap of her fingers, with Miter taking my place. So far he hasn't wanted to. But I'm also telling you that Miter's dangerous. They're gunning for your boy, Mr. Lang. If they get to him before anybody else does —" The sheriff shrugged.

"All right," Ernie said tensely. "They've taken the law into their own hands, in other words."

"Miter is the law, Mr. Lang. In this county, anyway. And if he and Mrs. Nivero should catch up with your son somewhere else, who's going to worry too much about what happens then? The kid's a murder suspect. He ran off with Mrs. Nivero's daughter."

Ernie Lang nodded slowly, letting it come to him.

"What are you going to do, Mr. Lang?"

"I'd like to stay in contact with you, if you don't mind. I'm going to phone my wife and have her drive down here. I don't think Billy's going to try to contact me. He never has, when he was in trouble. Do you know a decent place to stay?"

"The Palms Motel is okay, about five blocks down the street. They've got phones."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know when you find out anything."

"It's like I said. I've got two of my own."

BY TEN-THIRTY that morning, fifty-one miles north, Billy Lang sat in the bus station at Dunston. Dressed in the Army jacket, glasses and hat, he looked across the waiting room at Maria. He'd gone out of the hotel at nine, into a J. C. Penny store. There he bought a pale blue dress and a pink sweater, telling the clerk they were presents for his mother.

Then he'd gone down the street to a five-and-ten, where he'd bought some toilet articles; he'd stolen a set of hair curlers. He

went back to the hotel, where Maria had finished dying her hair. She'd put her hair up quickly then.

Now they were in the bus station. Maria, the kerchief arranged to show some of the red hair, sat alone in the new dress and sweater. She did not look at him; she sat motionless, hands on her lap. In one of those hands, he knew, was a ticket for San Francisco. In his own hand was a ticket for Oakland. He would, when they'd traveled far enough north, get his fare changed to San Francisco.

The minutes crept by. A man in a shiny black suit got up and got a cup of chocolate from a vending machine. A baby lying in the lap of a very plump woman suddenly began crying loudly, then stopped just as abruptly. A bus rolled up beside the station. Five passengers stood up and waited until the boarding call was made through a crackling loudspeaker.

Maria got on two people ahead of him and sat down midway through the uncrowded bus, alone. Billy sat down five seats behind her, across the aisle. A hundred miles north, he got up and joined her. She took his hand and held it tightly.

"How're you doing?" he asked, grinning reassuringly.

"Fine," she whispered.

"Good," he said. "We're doing it now. We're doing it just great."

THE MOTEL room Ernie Lang had rented in San Lupe was neat, efficient and clean. He sat down on one of the twin beds and put in a collect call to Anna in San Francisco. When she'd accepted it, he said:

"I talked to the sheriff down here, Anna. They don't know anything yet. Billy hasn't—"

"No," she said. "He hasn't called."

"I don't think he will."

"But there were some other people here, Ernie. A man and a woman."

"Mrs. Nivero?" he asked softly.

"Yes. And they—she and that Miter—they're looking for them, Ernie."

"The sheriff told me. What did you think?"

"She's angry, Ernie. And the man's dangerous, I think."

"Yes." He took a breath. "You wouldn't want to drive down here, would you, Anna? Right away?"

She was silent for a moment.

"I'd like to have you with me."

"Of course, Ernie," she said quickly.

"I'm at the Palms Motel in San Lupe. Be careful, Anna. And—bring my pistol, will you?"

"All right, Ernie. I'll leave right away."

When he'd hung up, there was a tapping on his door. He opened it to a casually smiling young man wearing an unpressed sport coat. "Name's Rogers, Mr. Lang. Reporter from Los Angeles. Sheriff Case

said you were in town. I'd like to talk to you, if you don't mind."

Ernie motioned him inside, and the young man said, "Trouble with reporting crime in a state like this is there's always too much. We don't have room for all of it. But this one caught my eye. It's the girl mainly. Human interest. I don't know how much space we can give it, but I'm interested, Mr. Lang."

Ernie looked at him and did not like him; but he waited, trying to be patient.

"You want him caught, Mr. Lang?"

"Certainly, I want him caught."

"Mind if I sit down, so I can take notes? I'd like to have something to phone in before noon, if you don't mind." The reporter sat down and lit himself a cigarette. "You really wouldn't mind seeing him picked up, then?"

"It's for his own good. There isn't anything to be gained running."

The reporter continued with his questions. And Ernie answered them as carefully and as honestly as he could. Ten minutes later the reporter was gone. Ernie sat looking at a wall, feeling a hollow frustration. He wanted to do everything to stop this. But he knew he could do nothing now, nothing but wait.

It was just past 12:30 that afternoon when the telephone rang. He answered and Sheriff Monty Case said, "We found his car near a little town called Tiller, about fifty miles north in the county. I'm going up there. If you want to come along we'll pick you up on the way out."

Ernie Lang left a message with the motel to give to Anna. An hour and half later he was standing on the rocky coastal ground, looking down at the smashed convertible resting against the wind-bent trees near the small stream. There was a flurry of activity by the sheriff's people around the car. Tiller's constable, a skinny young man wearing blue jeans and a plaid sports shirt, said, "George Hobert's boy found it. He came down along the creek, then told his pa, and George phoned it to me."

"Well," the sheriff said, "we know where he was anyway. I'd like to use your place, Tim, while we get started checking. There's not much more we can do here."

Ernie Lang rode with the sheriff into Tiller, where the young constable led them into a small office on the second floor of a building on the main street. Three uni-

formed deputies and two detectives had followed him up. He said to all of them, "Just start checking. Any place and every place."

When they had gone, the sheriff said to Ernie Lang, "I talked to Carl Miter on the phone before we left San Lupe. They were headed back down in this direction. They talked to your wife."

"Yes," Ernie said. "I know."

"Well, they'll probably be here in about three hours."

Case began using the telephone then, and Ernie listened without really hearing, as the time passed. He studied, without caring, the furniture of the small room. There was a faded oak desk, four wooden chairs and a wooden file case. All of it looked as though it had been purchased from a second-hand shop. Finally the sheriff said to him, "Your wife coming down?"

"Yes. I left word at the motel for her to get in touch with your office in San Lupe. She ought to get there about four o'clock, I think." He looked at his watch. It was now a little after three.

"What do you think, Mr. Lang? Is he around here, or did he take off?"

"I don't know what to think, Sheriff."

The telephone rang. The sheriff answered, listened and hung up. He said to Ernie, "Smith, one of my detectives. He just made a check on the bus station at Dunston, the nearest bus terminal. Nobody there remembers a couple matching the description. That's the only transportation they could buy out of here—there isn't a train stop around here."

"They could hitchhike," Ernie said. "Or he could have stolen another car."

"Yes," the sheriff said. "We're covering the highways. But it's too bad we don't have enough men to put a block on every country road around here. Still—he might have ditched that car of his yesterday. They could have gone a long way in that time."

The dusty office was silent until a squat, florid-faced detective named Corbin walked in. He said to the sheriff, "I think I've got something, Monty. Girl on the counter of the dime store remembers a kid matching the Lang boy's description. He came in about closing time and bought a cardboard suitcase. She thought he was wearing an Army jacket of some kind and a hat. But her description matches the kid's otherwise."

The sheriff sat more alertly behind the old desk. "Just went in and bought a suitcase?"

"That's what she said. Last night, alone. Around five-thirty."

The sheriff turned to Ernie. "How smart is he, Mr. Lang?"

"Pretty smart."

"Maybe he figured that *we'd* figure he'd run. Only maybe he ran just this far, then stopped." He said

to the detective. "How many places around here could he stay—with the girl?"

"The motels up near the highway, I guess. I don't think there's a hotel in this town."

"Get somebody on the motels. And radio Smith from the car to start checking around Dunston. Motels, hotels, whatever they've got. What kind of Army jacket did the girl say?"

"She didn't. She said it just looked like an Army jacket, that's all."

"He hasn't been in the Army, has he, Mr. Lang?" Sheriff Case asked.

"No."

'Well, he might have picked that jacket up anywhere. Stolen it, maybe."

"I noticed a surplus place down the street," the detective said. "I'll check it."

The detective left, and the sheriff said, "Just *how* smart is he, Mr. Lang?"

"He's got an IQ of one hundred and thirty."

"Well, he beats me by fifteen." He got out a new cigar and tore off the wrapper. "I wish to all hell he were dumb."

At four-five the sheriff handed the telephone to Ernie. "Your wife's in San Lupe, Mr. Lang. At my office."

Ernie took the telephone and said, "Hello, Anna. How are you?"

"I'm fine, Ernie."

"Could you drive over here? They'll tell you how to get here. If you're not too tired."

"I'm not too tired, Ernie. They found his car?"

"Yes."

"Anything else?"

"Not much. They're working."

"I'll come right over."

An hour later he saw the station wagon stop below on the street, just ahead of the sheriff's car. He went down and opened the door for her. She looked tired, but he was glad to see her. He thought of kissing her; but he didn't. "I'm glad you came down."

She got out. "If you wanted me, Ernie, I wanted to come. Any more news?"

He shook his head, and then saw the camper coming fast down the street. It stopped behind the sheriff's car. Mrs. Nivero got out quickly and went into the building. Carl Miter followed, pausing to look coolly at the Langs; then he went inside.

"Mrs. Nivero?" Ernie asked wearily.

"Yes," Anna said. "And Miter."

"We'd better go up."

They went up the dust-covered stairway to the small office on the second floor. When they reached the doorway, Elizabeth Nivero was saying crisply, "Where'd you find the car, Monty?"

"Little way out of town, Elizabeth."

"What else have you found?"

"Not much," the sheriff said. "I guess you've met Mrs. Lang already."

Elizabeth Nivero turned and saw them for the first time.

"This is the boy's father, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth Nivero met Ernie's stare coldly. She turned back to the sheriff. "Don't you have *any*thing, Monty?"

The telephone rang and the sheriff picked it up. He listened and finally said, "All right. We'll be right over." He put the telephone down. "We've got something now. Smith just checked a hotel over at Dunston. Apparently the boy stayed there overnight. With the girl, I guess."

He got up and left the room. Mrs. Nivero, eyes dark and flashing, followed, accompanied by Carl Miter. Ernie touched his wife's arm and said softly, "Let's go, Anna."

Ten minutes later they were in the small lobby of the Dunston hotel. The detective, Smith, said to the sheriff, "The clerk told me the kid came in and bought a room last night. Said he was wearing glasses, but everything else matched. He was alone. But I went over the room. I think the girl was there too. She probably sneaked in the back way. I found this."

Smith held out an empty hair-dye bottle. "Looks like she dyed her hair red. There're marks on the sink. And I found a couple of strands of hair on the pillow up there, before she'd dyed it." He looked at Mrs. Nivero apologetically.

"When did they leave?" the sheriff asked.

"The boy walked out this morning a little after nine. The girl apparently got out the way she came in."

The second detective, Corbin, had come in. He said to the sheriff, "I checked the surplus store. He bought a fatigue jacket and a hat, all right."

"I want to see the room," Mrs. Nivero said thinly.

"Elizabeth—" the sheriff said.

"If you don't mind."

"All right," Case said, sighing. Then he said to Smith. "You might check that bus station again. Try the new descriptions with them." He looked at Mrs. Nivero again. "All right, Elizabeth. We'll go up."

Ernie Lang followed them and stood at the door as Mrs. Nivero walked slowly around the room. The bedclothes were mussed, and there was impression on the old mattress. She bent down and saw another fine hair on the pillow. She snapped her hand across it, then turned around. Her face had paled. Ernie said, "Mrs. Nivero—"

"Get out of my way," she said viciously.

He stepped aside, and she went swiftly down the hall.

"I can't blame her," the sheriff said softly.

Ernie's jaw muscles flickered; then he went with the sheriff back down to the lobby. They were going outside when Smith came back down the street and said, "With the glasses, fatigue jacket, hat, they remembered the kid this time at the bus station. The girl too. She was wearing a kerchief and a sweater and a blue dress. There's a Penny store just down the street. I checked it on the way back. The kid bought the sweater and dress this morning. They got on the bus separately, on the ten-forty bus."

"Where were they headed?" the sheriff said grimly.

"The boy bought a ticket for Oakland, the girl one for San Francisco."

The sheriff looked at his watch. It was now 5:43.

"I checked that too," the detective said. "The bus was on time. They both went to San Francisco. They got there at five-twenty, got off and disappeared."

Ernie Lang seated Anna in the station wagon, then walked up to the sheriff's car. "We're going back to San Francisco, Sheriff. I appreciate all of your cooperation." He looked up the street, at the parked camper. Carl Miter had gone into a small cafe moments ago; Mrs. Nivero sat stiffly in the cab.

"Well," the sheriff said, "they'll be at work up there." He looked ahead at that camper. "And I hope the law there finds them, Mr. Lang. I truly do."

The sheriff's car rolled away. Carl Miter came out of the cafe, carrying a coffee carton and wrapped sandwiches. Ernie walked on up the street to the camper. He looked in at Mrs. Nivero, as Miter got behind the wheel.

"I just wanted to tell you that I'm sorry, Mrs. Nivero."

She stared straight ahead, silently.

"I think I know where you're going now," Ernie said carefully. "I can understand how you feel about it. But he's my son just as much as the girl's your daughter."

She turned to stare at him with hating eyes. "Are you trying to protect him, Mr. Lang?"

"I'm just interested in seeing this stopped."

"He stole my daughter."

"She's with him, yes. But—"

"He kidnapped her, Mr. Lang. And he's going to be caught."

"Are you going to San Francisco?"

"We're going wherever he is," she said. "And you'd better do that too, Mr. Lang. Because if we get to him first—" She motioned a hand, and the pick-up leaped away.

IN SAN FRANCISCO, in a small tenderloin hotel, Billy Lang surveyed the room. It was better than the one they'd had the night before, he thought, but not much. He'd bought sandwiches at the bus

depot when they got off; they weren't hungry now. And at least, in the city, they hadn't had to sneak around like they'd had to do last night in Dunston. He'd simply registered them as man and wife under the first name that came to mind. He paced about, gingerly, feeling his nerves singing. Finally he stopped and looked at Maria.

Maria sat forlornly in a chair. She'd begun coughing on the bus, and it had irritated him. Now she was coughing again, but this time he felt concern. He sat down on the arm of her chair and placed his face against her forehead. "How do you feel?"

"I'm all right, Billy."

"Your forehead feels like it's burning up."

"It isn't anything. I'll be fine."

"I'm going to phone my dad now. Only I don't want to use the phone in here. I'll go down and I'll get some cough medicine. Everything's going to be all right now. They never picked up a thing on us. As far as they're concerned, we're in Mexico. In a few minutes I'll be talking to my dad, and he'll help us. I know he will. Then everything'll be fine. Don't you want to get into bed?"

"Yes, I think so."

"That's right," he said gently. "You do that. And I'm going down now. You just relax. It's excitement, that's all."

He left quickly, so she could undress and get into bed. He took the elevator down and stepped into the cool evening. He paused, looking along the garish tenderloin street. The first time he'd been home in all of these months, he thought, feeling his anger starting again, and he'd had to sneak in like any common criminal. Why? he thought, swearing silently. *Why?*

Again his nerves were singing. He saw a neon cocktail sign of one of the many bars along the street and moved toward it. One drink, he thought—he could use that right now.

He walked into the bar and sat down at the far end, below a television set. A half dozen other bored-looking customers sat drinking, looking up at the screen, where a cartoon was playing. A waitress had been reading a newspaper, and now she was getting drinks for a couple at a table. Billy ordered a bourbon and slid the newspaper before him. The story was on the front page: a copyrighted interview with his father, datelined San Lupe.

He read it swiftly, realizing with sudden shock that, being local, he was more important news here. He read, blinking rapidly. He came to the question, "Do you want to see him caught, Mr. Lang?" And the answer, "Of course, I do." And then he closed his eyes, feeling a pulse hammering in his temples. He was breathing hard now, and, with effort, he got control of him-

self and carefully pushed the newspaper back to where it had been.

His drink was placed before him and change made. He started to pick up the glass, but he couldn't steady his hand enough to hold it for several seconds. Then finally he drank, slowly returned the glass to the bar, and sat staring at the arrangement of bottles ahead of him. It was several minutes before he realized that the cartoon had changed to a local news program on the television set.

He looked up to see a photograph of himself, one taken years ago at the Juvenile Hall. He touched his eye glasses, then the brim of his hat. He looked sideways to see six pairs of eyes staring up at that screen.

"Another?" the bartender was asking him.

"No, thank you," he said quietly.

He got up, as the camera returned to the newscaster. He walked out with an even pace, hearing the smooth voice saying, "Law officials have traced Billy Lang back to San Francisco. He and the young girl are known to have gotten off a bus in this city not more than forty minutes ago. The girl was wearing a blue dress and pink sweater. Her hair has been dyed red. The boy is believed to be wearing a disguise of glasses, hat, Army fatigue jacket—"

He was outside. He looked in both directions, then moved swiftly toward an alley. When he reached it, he bounded down it, running hard . . .

In the bar a thin man with yellow hair motioned to the bartender. "That kid who just went out of here, Harry."

The bartender looked at him. "Yeah," he said softly. He turned and lifted a telephone.

IN THE CAMPER speeding north, Carl Miter looked again in a rearview mirror. "Them, all right. They're staying right behind us."

"I don't care what they're doing," Elizabeth Nivero said.

"Don't you want to get a little sleep, Elizabeth?"

"Well, I could stop and you could get in back there while I'm driving. Can't do anything until we get up there anyway."

"I'm not sleepy."

"How about some food then? Those sandwiches looked good. Coffee's still hot."

"I'm not hungry."

"You wouldn't mind if I went ahead and had a little, would you?"

"I'm sorry, Carl," she said. "I wasn't thinking." She unwrapped a sandwich and handed it to him,

then poured coffee from the carton into a plastic cup. She held the cup until he'd eaten the sandwich with hungry gulps. Then he took the cup and drove with one hand.

"That was good," he said. "I can go on that, all right."

She sat silently, staring at the road ahead. Then she said tightly, "I keep thinking of that filthy hotel room."

"Now, Elizabeth."

"He forced her, Carl. She would never—"

"It doesn't do any good thinking that way."

"He's got to pay for it."

He handed her the empty cup, then let his hand graze along the smooth steel of the rifle clamped along the seat just under his knees. "Well, now, he will, Elizabeth. You've just go to believe that he will."

BILLY LANG followed alleys for blocks, then looked back. His heart was pounding wildly. He stood now at McAllister Street, with Civic Center in sight. He removed his hat and shrugged out of the fatigue jacket. He threw them into a refuse can; the glasses followed. It was getting cold now, but he couldn't afford to wear that jacket any longer. Damn him, he thought, thinking of what his father had told that reporter. *He wants me caught.*

He looked across the street and saw a telephone booth. He trotted across, between cars, and stepped into the booth.

In the hotel room, Maria heard the telephone ring. She hesitated, lying in bed, shivering. On the fifth ring, she picked it up. "Yes?"

"What's the matter with you?" he said. "Didn't you hear it ringing?"

"Billy?"

"Shut up and listen to me! They know we're here!"

"What's happened, Billy? Where are you?"

"I told you to shut up and listen to me! My father sold me out! Now you're not going to do that. I'm telling you!"

"Billy!"

"I want you to listen to this, and get it straight. You get the hell out of that hotel room. And get rid of that sweater! Go out, and fast, and down to Market Street. Get on a Number 5 bus going west. I'm at McAllister Street. I'll get on the bus when I see which one you're on. And don't you trick me, by God. If you phone anyone or tell anyone, I'll—"

"Billy!" She had begun crying now, shivering with chills, tears streaming down her face.

His voice suddenly softened. "Listen—I'm sorry. I just got excited."

"Billy, I love you!"

"Please. Don't pay any attention. I'm all right now. I do love you, little one."

Maria found reassurance in his

voice. She wiped at the tears, and said in a choked voice, "I'll do anything you want, Billy."

"I know, honey. It's just that they're looking for us here now. Can you do what I asked?"

"Market Street?"

"That's right. You leave the hotel and turn left. Then you go right at the first intersection and keep walking until you get to Market. That's the big street. There's a bus stop there. There'll be a Number Five bus heading to your right as you stand there. Get on it. Ill get on just after it turns off Market, to the right. I threw away that jacket and hat and the glasses, see? They knew about those. And they knew about your sweater too. So you've got to get rid of it. There'll still be a bunch of people going home, because the stores closed not too long ago. They won't spot us if it's crowded. Don't speak to me when I get on. All right? Can you do it?"

"Yes," she said in a small voice, "I can do it, Billy."

Billy walked down the street toward the Market Street intersection and waited at the bus stop. Small crowds kept collecting, then disbursing as the busses came to a stop. Finally he saw her. He boarded, paid his fare, then stood in the aisle as the bus moved on. She was in back, sitting near the rear door.

Twelve blocks later, he sat down behind her.

He whispered, "Don't look at me. Get off the next stop after I do."

He rode in silence then, until the bus neared the University of San Francisco. He pressed the buzzer and got off. He watched the tail lights of the bus moving on and saw ahead the outline of the college buildings. He could feel the cold, bitterly. He moved in a trot now, toward the next stop. She'd gotten off there and was waiting.

He came to Maria quickly, and they stepped back into the shadows. He took her hand, and he could feel her shivering. "I heard it in a bar on television," he said. "They found out we came up on that bus. They showed a picture of me. And I read a story in a newspaper. My dad went down to San Lupe, and he wants me caught."

He shook his head, tense with anger. "He never loved me. Never! My mother? She's dead, see? When I was born. And that was why my father always hated me. The woman I called my mother—she wasn't. Oh, she put on an act, but she didn't love me either. Now they all want me caught." He shook his head again. "Not when things started going right for the first time in my life. Now when I finally found you!"

"Billy, I love you."

He nodded, eyes bright. "Sure, and they're not going to ruin that. Are you cold?"

"I'm terribly cold." She went in-

to his arms, pressing her face against his chest, coughing again.

"I've got to get a car somewhere." He looked up at the tall spire of a church. "You go in there. Act like you're worshipping or something. And help me figure out where to go, will you? Because we've got to go somewhere and not let them ruin everything. You know what to do inside a place like that, don't you?"

"Yes," she said, "I know what to do."

He waited until she'd disappeared behind the church doors. Then he went to the corner and turned right, walking toward the houses of the neighborhood. He walked block after block on the slanting streets, looking into cars as he passed. There was fog coming in now, adding more bite to the cold, but he moved fast to keep warm. They're not going to stop us, he thought viciously. Not now.

Then, down the incline of a street, he saw a new Chrysler stop in front of a large house. A tall man got out carrying what was obviously a sacked bottle and walked to the door, weaving. Billy waited until he'd gone inside; then he hurried down the street. He stopped beside the car and could see, by the illumination of a street lamp down the block, the keys in the ignition.

He looked up and down the street, then at the house where the man had disappeared. Light showed through slanted Venetian blinds. He got into the car, carefully released the emergency brake and coasted away from the curb.

When he'd turned the corner below, he switched on the headlights and started the engine. He hit the accelerator, feeling a surge of new confidence with the power. Then he braked to a normal speed and drove back to the church. He parked the car and ran up the steps to go inside. He saw her kneeling in one of the pews. He went down and took her arm, saying, "Let's get the hell out of here."

As he drove away, she was coughing again. He found the heater control and turned it on. "That guy who owns this was drunk. I could see it when he went into his house. If he just knocks himself out now, we're safe. Did you think of anything in there, in that church?"

"Yes," she said. "I prayed."

"Prayed!"

She looked at him with wide eyes. "For us, Billy."

"I mean about where we can go!'

She blinked, then said, "There's a place up in the Sierra. A friend of my mother's has a summer house at Fallen Leaf, outside of Lake Tahoe. I was there twice. I remember where they kept an extra key, and they never use it during the winter."

"Good," he said, eyes brightening. "About two hundred miles.

We'll make it while it's dark and ditch this car then. Then we'll be all right."

"Billy—tell me again. Do you love me? Truly?"

He looked at her with irritation and headed downtown, toward the bridge that would take them east, across the bay. Maria started coughing again. When she stopped, she said, "Billy?"

"Goddam it," he said, that coughing getting on his nerve badly now. "I've *told* you."

IT WAS just after midnight when Carl Miter's camper, followed by Ernie Lang's station wagon, came off the Skyway into the heart of San Francisco. Ten minutes later both cars were parked near police headquarters. Five minutes later the four of them—Miter, Mrs. Nivero, Ernie and Anna—were seated around the desk of Inspector Ford, who was saying:

"We traced them to the hotel. It was on the same block where the boy went into the bar. Found the sweater the girl had, in a bureau. When the boy heard that telecast, he took off. Apparently he phoned the girl at the hotel. And she got out of there. We checked transportation. They got on a Number Five bus. The driver didn't recognize them at the time. But he did when we talked to him. He remembered the girl wasn't dressed for the cold. Neither was the boy.

"He says the boy wasn't wearing glasses or the hat. He'd got rid of the Army jacket too. He thinks they got off the bus the way they got on. Separately. He doesn't remember the boy getting off, but he does the girl. She got off at the University of San Francisco. So—" He shrugged.

"Well?" Elizabeth Nivero said sharply.

"That's the end of it. We've been checking around that neighborhood all night. We don't have a thing."

"Maybe he stole a car," Carl Miter said.

"The only report we've had on one missing was two hours ago. That was forty blocks away from that area, and we already picked up the kid who stole it." He shook his head, grimly.

"What about his house?" Mrs. Nivero said, looking at Ernie Lang.

"We put that under surveillance as soon as we knew they came up here. But that's a point, Mr. Lang. He might try to contact you now."

"I'm sure he won't," Ernie said. "But—"

"Might pay all around if you and your wife would go home now, just in case he calls."

Ernie looked at Mrs. Nivero; he felt his wife's hand touching his.

"All right," he said reluctantly. "If you'll contact me the minute you hear anything."

The inspector nodded. "And do the same for us, please."

Ernie drove home silently. Who-

ever was watching the house was invisible, when they got there. He followed Anna up the stairway into the chilled house. He turned up the heat, then said, "Are you tired?"

"Not very much," she said. "I'll make coffee and sandwiches. You sit down, Ernie."

He followed her into the kitchen and watched her prepare the coffee and sandwiches. "Anna, what do you think? Is he—" His voice trailed away.

She stopped working, watching him.

"I mean," he said, "the sheriff in San Lupe asked me if he were violent. He meant dangerous, I think. I didn't want to face it. I still don't. But we've never talked about it, since that bar owner was killed. What do you think, Anna?"

She drew a long knife from a holder and cut the sandwiches. She looked again at Ernie, knife in hand. "I tried to love him like my own son, Ernie. And I did. I still do. But—"

"But what, Anna?"

"I don't think you'd want to hear it."

"No," he said. "I don't, if it's bad. But there isn't any choice now. I have to face as much truth as I can find. What is it, Anna?"

"Little things, at first. He always had a temper. You know that."

"Yes, but—

"Anna, what happened?"

She moved her shoulders wearily. "He could be mean, Ernie. He never was with you. He was frightened of you, I think. You never gave him any reason for that. But he was."

"Mean?"

"He threatened me, several times. Once, about six months before that shooting, he got into a terrible rage." She looked at the knife. "It was an argument, about nothing, really. But he said he was going to use this on me. I thought he meant it. He held the blade at my throat, and—"

"Damn it, Anna! Why didn't you tell me?"

Tears were in her eyes now. "Because I didn't want you to be hurt. I'd grown to love him, yes. But I was afraid of him, Ernie. I was for years. I just couldn't help it."

His face felt stiff; he sat there silently.

"Ernie, I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "I'm the one who should be sorry. Sorry I didn't give you a chance to trust me, so you would have told me these things. Sorry that I wouldn't see him in the right light." He doubled a hand in frustration.

"Ernie," she said, "what can we do about it now?"

He looked at her and forced himself to smile wanly, trying to give her reassurance.

"Wait," he said quietly. "Just wait!"

BILLY LANG drove the large car up the curving mountain road. They had passed Strawberry Lodge now, and would be going over the high elevation at Echo Summit soon. There was snow bordering the road, its whiteness caught in the spread of the headlights, but he had listened to the car's radio and learned there was no new snow expected and that it had only fallen at this higher altitude; the road was clear all the way over the pass.

He had also heard on the radio that they had found out which hotel they'd used in San Francisco, the fact that they'd used that city bus, and that they had then lost them. There had been no other news on them, and now the San Francisco stations were fading as they drew further away from the city. All right, he thought, maybe they'd gotten away clean. He should, he knew, relax a little, thinking that.

But he kept remembering how he'd had to stop for gas in Sacramento. He'd picked a service station on the by-pass route, and when he'd turned off the ignition, he'd felt his nerves jumping. A tall, slow-moving kid had ambled out, eyes contemptuous. Then he'd looked at Maria. He'd looked at her in the wrong way, and Billy had felt the fury rising, blinding him. He'd snapped at that kid viciously, telling him to hurry up and get the tank filled. The kid had taken his time, anyway. And finally, when he'd got it done, Billy had truly read him off.

"Damn him," he whispered now.

"What is it, Billy?" Maria asked.

"That kid back in Sacramento."

"Don't think of him any more, Billy. He doesn't matter, does he? It's just us, isn't it?"

He pressed the gas pedal down, taking the curves hard. He'd passed the summit now, and they were traveling along the narrow rock road forming the pass. "God damn him and everybody else!" he whispered. "They make you run and hide and scramble around like an animal. Why? How come they're always after *me?*"

"Billy, please!"

He looked at her in the glow of the dashlights. "What do you know anyway? What do you know about anything? All your life you've been protected. You never had it any way but good. What do you know about how it's been for *me?*"

They'd crossed the pass now, and he rolled the car swiftly down the grade. There was moonlight; stars were reflected in the large oval of Lake Tahoe, which was surrounded by tall pine trees. There were the orange runway lights of a small airport, and the multi-colored lights of the motels lining the highway which ran along the south shore. Beyond swung the white shaft of a casino spotlight.

The anger, the resentment,

fired by his nervousness, still pumped through him. When they got down to the lower highway, he suddenly wheeled the car off on a small residential road. He killed the lights, and they sat there, in the soft moonlight. He held his hands doubled against his legs to keep them from shaking.

"Billy," she said, "what is it? Is it me?"

He swallowed and gradually got control again. "No," he said softly. "Not you, little one. Never you."

He held her more tightly and felt the bitterness melting. Only themselves, he thought. That was all that counted. It was more than he'd ever had, and it was, he told himself, all he wanted. Maria. Himself. Together. "I love you, little one," he whispered. "Would you marry me? Now?"

She tipped her head up and stared at him in surprise.

"We could," he said. "Nevada's only miles away. We could keep on driving. Carson City can't be far. Get married. Then come back up here. I heard they're open all night down there." And now, he knew, this was the most important thing of his life.

"Married?" she whispered.

"Will you?"

She nodded. "Yes."

ERNIE LANG had dozed in the living room chair. He had not been able to bring himself to go to bed. He'd insisted that Anna do that, and she was now sleeping in their bedroom. When the telephone rang he picked it up immediately. "Yes?"

"Inspector Ford, Mr. Lang. A fellow living out near the university got up about a half hour ago and saw his car was gone. Chrysler, current model. He gave us the license number. Five minutes ago we got a report from Sacramento. A service station attendant there has a highway patrolman friend who stops for a Coke nights.

"The attendant was still mad over some kid reading him off for no reason. He told the patrolman about it. So the patrolman asks some questions. The attendant didn't remember the license number of the car, but the car matched the description of the one stolen. There was a girl with the boy. They match the descriptions of your son and the Nivero girl. So we're pretty certain they went through Sacramento, heading east, about three hours ago. Do you have any idea where he might be going, Mr. Lang?"

Ernie Lang was completely awake now. "No, I don't."

"Never took any trips over there?"

"We always went north on vacations."

"Well, I wanted you to know."

"How about Mrs. Nivero and Miter?"

"They just left."

"They're following, aren't they? To Sacramento?"

"I think so. How about you, Mr. Lang?"

"Yes," he said quietly. "I'll be going too. Thank you, Inspector."

PASSING the stretch of motels on the south edge of Lake Tahoe, Billy saw a sheriff's car with California license plates coming in their direction. They met, and Billy held his breath. But the car went on, disappearing in his rear-view mirror. He let his breath out. It was dangerous, he knew, trying this. But he had to do it. If they were married, then Maria would be truly his. Nobody could change that then, no matter what happened.

He looked at her beside him, small, tender, but very real. Yes, he thought, feeling a moment of bursting elation. Yes—

They crossed the stateline into Nevada. There was a glittering display of casino marquees, and then they were beyond the lights, moving over the eastern pass of Spooners Summit, coming down the wide, sweeping grade toward Carson City.

When he drove into the heart of the small, antique capitol, he saw a wedding chapel off the main avenue. He parked in front of it and looked at his watch. It was a few minutes after one A.M. He turned to Maria. "Ready?"

She nodded, wide-eyed.

They went into the ante-room of the chapel. A buzzer sounded somewhere in back. They waited and looked at the simplicity of the small room beyond which was dominated by a plain-looking altar. A woman crossed through that room and smiled at them. "Yes?"

"We'd like to get married," Billy said simply. Once again his nervousness was returning, full force.

"Certainly," the woman said. "It's twenty dollars. I'll phone the minister for you. He'll be here right away. May I have your license?"

He felt a quick surge of anger. "Don't we get that here?"

"You'll have to get it at the courthouse."

"You mean we have to wait until morning?"

"They're open all night. It's just down the block and across the street. Why don't you go pick that up, while I phone the minister?"

Billy nodded, relieved.

They walked the half block to the courthouse, then went inside to

a brightly lit marriage license office. They stood at the counter, while a businesslike woman with gray hair made out the application.

"Name?" she asked.

Billy's throat tightened. He could feel the quivering in his legs now. Would they ask for his identification? If they didn't, he could give them a wrong name. But if they did—

He rubbed his hands down the sides of his trousers. The woman looked up at him impatiently. He would, he decided, tell the truth:

"William R. Lang."

"Driver's license, please?"

When they walked out of the courthouse, back toward the chapel, he thought: we'd better run now, because if that woman remembered anything from the newspapers, she could—

"Billy?" Maria said. He looked down at her. It was cold here, and she no longer even had the sweater. But the simple blue dress revealed her fine, well-molded body. He loved her, he thought, mentally and physically. "Are we really going to be married now?"

"Yes," he said.

Her hand tightened against his. They walked into the chapel. Fifteen minutes later the certificate was in his hand. He drove back through town and returned up the grade toward Lake Tahoe. He put his arm around her, driving through moonlight coming down on the rocky cliffs. He pulled her close, feeling her against him. "Mine—" he whispered.

When they reached Tahoe, Maria explained how to get to Fallen Leaf Lake. Again, Billy drove the length of the south-shore community. This time he noticed a large sporting-goods store near where the highway junctioned with another and then ran north along the west edge of the lake.

He slowed, passing the store, and made up his mind what he was going to do. Then he went out the west-shore highway until he reached the sign that pointed to Fallen Leaf Lake. He turned onto a narrow, winding road.

A half mile in, he saw sand across the road, obviously washed down from some snow-melting day in the past; there were no tire marks on it.

"Good," he said softly.

He drove on until his headlights picked up the smooth, clear water of the lake. The moon now was high and small, showing over the high rugged peaks on the other side of the water. He traveled along the east bank, just below heavy clusters of pine, among which were scattered summer cabins.

"Right up there, I think," Maria said. He stopped when he reached a wooden sign that said, "Joseph Norris." Maria nodded and said, "Yes. Up there, on the hill."

He turned the car into a short

parking slot, turned off the lights and got out. The freezing high-altitude cold stung his face and hands. He hurried, helping Maria up a steep wooden stairway. She was shivering again, and she'd started coughing as soon as she was in the biting air. When they reached the cabin, a large yellow-pine structure with an aluminum roof, she controlled her coughing and said, "Under that rock over there."

He rolled the rock away. There was a key in the sandy soil, wrapped in plastic. He unwrapped it, walked to the front stoop and opened the door.

The front room was as cold as the outdoors. In the moonlight coming through the open doorway, he saw ghostly pieces of furniture. The windows were draped. He walked to a lamp and turned the switch; there was no light, and he knew the electricity had been turned off.

"There're probably candles," Maria said. "And maybe some canned food. I'm so cold, Billy, and hungry."

"Sure," he said smoothly. He was feeling better. It looked all right here, he thought. He had only one thing more to do before he closed off the world.

He found candles placed in holders over a fireplace. He asked Maria to shut the door, then lighted them. The yellow flames suddenly brightened the interior. He carried one of the candles through the house to the kitchen. He opened cupboard after cupboard. There was no food. He looked in the three bedrooms. There were no blankets. He could find no heat registers. He came back to the large front room.

"I'll get food, little one. I have to go out now and do something."

"Don't leave me, Billy," she said. "Not now."

"It won't take long." He looked at the fireplace skeptically; if he started a fire there would be smoke from the chimney; but he knew she could not stand this cold. "I'll build a fire for you first. There must be some wood here."

"They kept it stacked behind the kitchen."

In a few minutes flames were leaping up the chimney. Heat began dissolving the cold of the room. "See?" He pulled a couch across the floor, placing it directly in front of the fire. "It's going to be fine now. I'll be back in a little while, and everything's going to be perfect."

"Billy, don't leave me. Please."

"I have to, little one. But don't you worry." He put his arms around her and felt her body pressed against his. He didn't want to go. But he had to, he knew. He led her to the sofa. "Just lie down here, in front of that fire."

She did, and he bent over her, touching her forehead with his lips. It was burning, he realized. There was an unusual shine to her

eyes. But she would be all right now, he told himself—with some rest, and the heat.

"Don't you worry. I just have to do this one thing, then I'll be back. Close your eyes, little one. Think of us. Remember—we're married now." He kissed her; her mouth was hot, responsive, loving. He made himself straighten finally, touched her cheek tenderly, then left.

He drove back along the narrow road to the highway, and returned, on that, to the main road in Tahoe where he had seen the sporting-goods store. There was no other traffic in sight now. He rolled the large car into the parking area in front of the store, and saw that the parking area went entirely around the large building. He drove around to the back and stopped.

He waited in the moonlight. A single car passed on the highway. It was quiet, and the store was dark. He could see a rear entrance, with a small window beside it.

He got out and ran to the back door. It was locked. He examined the lock. It was above the handle, the kind that could be opened from the inside. He lifted a rock from beside the building, paused, then tapped it against a pane of the small window. Glass splintered and fell with a light cracking sound. He put his arm through the pane, feeling toward the inside of the lock. His fingers touched the lever. He turned it and the door came open. He went inside, swiftly, shutting the door behind him.

He walked through the store toward the front, where light from a street lamp dimly illuminated the interior. He saw what he was looking for: a gun counter. He selected a .38 pistol, then found ammunition for it, which he put into his pocket. He was returning toward the rear when headlights flashed through the store.

He heard the car rolling into the parking area, and fell, just as a spotlight swept through the room, its white shaft swinging over him.

He lay flat, teeth gritting together. The spot was cut and the headlights disappeared, as he heard the car going around the building. He got up and ran low, to the broken window. He saw a sheriff's car stop just behind the Chrysler. A lone deputy sat there for a few moments, playing his spotlight at the large car. Then he turned it on the door of the building. Billy drew back, watching to see if the light found the broken window. It did not and went out.

Carefully, he looked out again as he heard a car door opening. He saw the deputy walk slowly toward the Chrysler in the glare of his car's headlights, a flash in one hand, the other held gingerly over a holstered pistol.

He stopped beside the door and pointed the flash at the registration. Billy, his pulse pounding wildly, nearly blind with a vicious fury,

slowly opened the door. Then he ran toward the deputy, holding the pistol by the barrel.

The man turned, right hand clawing for his pistol. Billy swung his own gun with hard, brutal strength. The deputy had failed to jerk his pistol free when the butt struck the side of his head. He stumbled sideways, blood spitting from his temple.

Billy Lang swung again, this time full against his face. There was a crunching sound, and the deputy sat down clumsily, staring at Billy, his face turning crimson. Billy looked at him with bright, glazed eyes. Then he swung the pistol again, deliberately, smashing the man's face again. The deputy fell backward and lay supine, his face pouring blood.

Billy ran to the patrol car and shut off the lights. Then he went back to the Chrysler. He rounded the building, compelling himself not to do it too fast. But there was no traffic on the highway. He swung on it, turned north at the large intersection, and opened up the engine. He had to skid to make the Fallen Leaf turnoff.

He stopped just beyond the place where the sand had washed across the narrow road and doubled in his seat, gasping against the clutching of his stomach. He could not find his breath for a moment, and gagged, then gradually he felt himself unlocking from the tension. It was not what he'd done to that deputy; not that at all. It was that he'd almost been stopped from coming back to Maria and all that waited for him with her. Oh, no, he thought, breathing again with a long shuddering breath. It wasn't what he'd done to that rotten deputy—

He drove on again, watching the sides of the road. He'd seen garages built flush against the road when he'd driven out of here. He found one, a half mile from the house where he'd left Maria. He got out and examined it. It was locked with an outside padlock, and he could see through a small window that it was empty.

He returned to the car and got a tire iron from the trunk, then returned to the door. He fitted the iron inside the loop of the lock and levered it down until the lock snapped. He threw the lock into the brush. Then he opened the doors and ran the car inside.

He went on foot back toward that house, carrying the pistol, feeling better. He climbed the steps to the doorway, called softly to Maria and let himself in. He put the pistol on a table and walked to her.

"Are you all right?" he asked gently.

"Yes. It's warm now. Are you?"

"Oh, sure," he said, sitting down, putting his arms around her. "I couldn't get the food tonight. But I will tomorrow, first thing."

"It's all right, Billy."

"You'll be fine now. You'll get

some good rest. You'll feel great in the morning."

He kissed her and then lay down with her. Rest, yes, he thought. But not for a little while now.

"I love you," she whispered, and again her lips were responsive.

"Yes," he whispered back, feeling her pressed against himself, thinking of the way he'd swung that pistol into that deputy's face, the blood spurting; the emotion took his breath away.

"Billy, *Billy*—" she gasped.

It was all that he'd ever wanted, spiraling above anything he'd ever known or felt or even dreamed about: a whirling emotion, building, building . . .

ERNIE LANG, with Anna beside him, drove into the station in Sacramento at four-thirty that morning. He saw the camper parked beyond the pumps. Elizabeth Nivero and Carl Miter were talking to a tall youth wearing a blue windbreaker. Ernie got out and walked over to them. Mrs. Nivero looked at him with contempt. Carl Miter smiled faintly, without humor.

"The kid's father," he said to the youth in the blue jacket.

The youth looked at him, then down at the oil-marked cement. There was a conceited air about him. He moved a narrow-toed shoe. "I'm off duty. I got to get going."

"You're the one who talked to him?" Ernie said evenly.

"I don't know that I talked to him. He sure as hell talked to me."

"What did he say?"

"Too damn much, as far as I'm concerned. Most of it I wouldn't repeat in front of the lady here."

"He's an animal," Mrs. Nivero breathed.

Ernie Lang looked at her, then back at the youth in the jacket. "You think he was heading east?"

"That's the way the car was pointed."

"I'm simply trying to find out as much as I can," Ernie said, holding his temper.

"Well, I told the cops all I know. That kid came in here and gassed up and read me off for no good reason and took off. That's all I know." He walked off with a swagger and got into a rebuilt Ford. He drove away with a loud roar.

"Carl," Mrs. Nivero said, "you'd better phone the police here."

Miter moved off toward a telephone booth.

Mrs. Nivero turned to Ernie Lang and met his stare, saying nothing.

"Mrs. Nivero," he finally said. "I—"

"I have nothing to say to you."

He looked at Miter in the booth, and was certain the man looked more alert, with the phone at his mouth.

Minutes later he came out and said, "He went east, all right."

"How do you know?" Ernie asked, tensing.

"They found this sheriff's deputy up at Lake Tahoe. Beat up bad. They figure he might not die. Deputy came to long enough to say what happened. He saw this car behind a sports store and went back to check. Billy-boy was inside, picking himself up a pistol. He came out and gun-whipped him. The deputy got the license number. It checks with the car that was stolen in San Francisco. He just about killed that deputy. And he's armed now. Pretty sweet all around, isn't it?"

Ernie felt the blood draining from his face, listening. There was no doubt about it now, and he couldn't fight it any longer: Billy was dangerous and getting more that way.

"Let's go," Elizabeth Nivero said, her face mask-like.

"Please listen to me for a moment," Ernie said.

She had started toward the truck. She stopped and stared at him again. "Why?"

"I want to see this stopped just as much as you do. I think we should stay together. Do what we can, putting together what we know about them."

Elizabeth Nivero turned away.

"Now wait a minute, Elizabeth," Carl Miter said pleasantly. "Maybe he's got something."

Mrs. Nivero stopped and looked at Miter in surprise.

"What I mean," Miter said, "maybe Lang here might have a better idea about where Billy-boy's heading than we do."

Mrs. Nivero came back, staring at Ernie, forgetting everything now, he thought, but the thought of getting to his son. "Do you have an idea where he's going?" she asked harshly.

"No," Ernie said honestly. "I don't. I don't think he has any particular place in mind. Lake Tahoe —we've never been there together. I don't believe he's ever been in Nevada. How about your daughter, Mrs. Nivero?"

"She is with your son, Mr. Lang, because she's being forced. This has nothing to do with her. Nothing at all."

"Well, that's probably right," Carl Miter said. "But maybe he got her to think of some place they could hide. That's a thought, anyway."

Ernie Lang watched Mrs. Nivero and was certain he saw her expression change.

"Mrs. Nivero?" he said.

She shook her head abruptly and returned to the camper.

Miter shrugged. "Just got to keep on going, I guess."

"Yes," Ernie said grimly, "and I'll be right behind you."

Miter smiled. "Can't stop that." He clumped across the concrete and got into the truck. Ernie returned to his station wagon. He wearily told Anna what he'd found

out, then followed the camper onto the highway, heading east.

IT WAS JUST past seven o'clock when Carl Miter drove over the high-elevation pass. Coming down toward the lake valley, the large circle of Lake Tahoe was visible, a pale, misty blue in the early-morning light. The higher peaks surrounding the basin were white-tipped with snow.

Miter came down the grade fast, saying, "They're right behind us, Elizabeth."

She nodded. "Lose them, then."

"Just as soon as we get down where those houses are. Regular streets down there?"

"Yes."

"All right." He looked at the trailing station wagon in the mirror. "You figure she'd remember that place, Elizabeth?"

"I'm sure of it. We were there together twice. She knew they closed it for the winter."

They came into the community, approaching the large intersection where the highway split. There was a post office, two large supermarkets and several smaller shops. "Where's this Fallen Leaf Lake?" he asked.

"North, on Highway Eighty-nine. About two or three miles, then you turn left. There's a sign."

"All right. I'll come back to it." He turned right, following Highway 50, going away from 89. "You don't want to turn this over to the sheriff up here, do you, Elizabeth?"

"No."

He nodded. "Good. Just hang on now."

He made a hard left turn, jamming the accelerator down. He drove into a residential avenue, fast, turned again, then speeded up once more. In the sudden surge of speed, the station wagon went out of sight behind. He turned again, then zigzagged at high speed through the neighborhood. He knew, minutes, later, that he'd lost them.

He drove back toward Highway 89, grinning. "Do you want to reach back there and bring up that pistol, Elizabeth?" She did that; then they were beyond the community, turning at the Fallen Leaf sign. He looked at the rock and trees and heavy brush growing on either side of the narrow road. "Yeah," he nodded. "I'm glad we brought those dogs."

Futilely, Ernie Lang searched the neighborhood for the camper. He traced back over a half dozen streets and gave up.

"My fault," he said bitterly. "I was half-asleep when he pulled away."

"Do you really think they know anything, Ernie?"

"I think Mrs. Nivero thought of something. I saw it in her eyes, in Sacramento. This proves it."

"What are we going to do?"

"Sheriff's station up here," he said. "That's all we can do now."

A uniformed officer was standing at the counter of the sub-station when Ernie walked in and explained why he was here. The officer nodded. "The sheriff came up from Placerville. But he's sleeping right now. We were working all night."

"How about the deputy that was injured?"

Muscles flickered along the man's lean cheeks. "He'll live." He looked at Ernie with unwavering eyes. "We got something else on your son, in the last hour. He and the girl got married in Carson City."

"Married?"

"Walked straight into the courthouse and bought a license, then got married. Woman who runs a chapel down there heard the descriptions on the radio after he came back up here and worked over Harry."

Ernie was silent for a long time, then he said, "There's a good chance he's still around here then, isn't there? If he came back in this direction?"

"Pretty good. We covered the highways going out of here, after we found Harry. They're only two main highways running out, plus two running up to the north shore. If he's going to hide now, I'd say he's got a better chance around here. Better than trying those main highways."

"I followed a deputy from Southern California up here. The mother of the girl's with him. They're hunting for my son. I think they'd like to find him before anyone else does. The deputy's armed and he's got dogs in his truck. I think they figured out a place those kids might go. They lost me when we got here. On purpose. Miter's the man's name. He's driving a blue camper, with an aluminum housing. License is LVA—three hundred and eighty-nine."

The deputy nodded. "We'll look for the camper too, then." He stared at Ernie with those steady eyes. "We'd like to find your son as much as anybody else would, Mr. Lang."

The sun was rising, casting full daylight on the surface of Fallen Leaf Lake. The water, where it was deep, was as blue as the sky was now; at the edges, where it was shallow, it was as clear as perfect ice. Carl Miter drove along the narrow road above the water until Elizabeth Miter said, "Up ahead now, about a half mile."

Miter cut the engine and let the car roll to a stop. He got out, unclamped the rifle from the seat and rested it against the truck. Then he buckled on his pistol belt. He picked up the rifle again and went around to the back, where he opened the door of the dogs' compartment. The red wide-jawed pointer leaped out first. Next came the small foxhound, then the third dog: a black animal, part Doberman, part Weimaraner. The dogs

ranged around the camper, sniffing. Miter motioned up the road, and they ran ahead of him silently.

When he reached the bottom of the steep stairway he snapped his fingers. The dogs stopped and waited for his next command. He looked up at the house with the aluminum roof. Smoke curled from the chimney. He grinned and loosened the pistol in its holster. Then he waved toward the house, and the dogs leaped up the stairway.

Inside, Billy Lang stood frozen, certain he'd heard the sound of an automobile minutes before. The stolen pistol was in his hand. Maria, seated on the couch before the fire, stared at him tensely seeing his hard, set face.

"Billy—" she began.

"Shut up," he whispered. Then he heard something running out there. He went to the drapes of a front window and moved them slightly, just in time to see the dogs bounding toward the house and Carl Miter appearing up the last steps of the stairway. He slashed the pistol into the window, and fired. The pistol kicked in his hand, and Carl Miter sprawled into the brush beside the stairway, then crawled fast, back down the bank.

Billy whirled, ran across the room and jerked Maria to her feet. "Move!"

She ran with him through the house, out the back door. Behind the house there were trees and heavy brush; above that was gray mountain rock.

"Hurry up!" he snapped savagely, going into the brush. He looked back and saw the red pointer loping toward them. He lifted the pistol and fired twice. The big dog tumbled, to lie trembling on the ground. Then they were in the cover of the brush.

Maria was breathing hard already, choking back coughs. He pulled her ahead until they found a small walking trail. He forced her to run along it, steadily, knowing that the trail was taking them in a circle around the south edge of the lake.

Finally they stopped and Maria stood gasping. "Listen," he whispered. Behind there was no sound. "All right," he said, eyes bright. "Let's go!"

Behind, Miter came cautiously around the house with his other two dogs. He saw the big red dog lying ahead, still trembling. He hurried to it and bent down, seeing the blood pouring from a large wound in its chest. He stared at the dog, loving it as much as he'd ever loved anything in his life. Then he drew out his pistol. He put the muzzle to the dog's head, his face like stone, and pressed the trigger. He stood up slowly and looked toward the brush growing away from the house. He motioned a hand, fury and acid in his mouth. The two remaining dogs bounded ahead. Carl Miter followed.

Sheriff's cars, with those of the highway patrol, ranged through the mountain community. Heavy snow had been late-coming, and the lower slope of the ski run going up the peaks to the south was still brown rock; the tramway and rope tows were unmoving. Dozens of seasonal shops and refreshment stands were closed. Traffic on all roads was light. The casinos on the Nevada side of the line were half-empty.

A greying highway patrolman drove slowly along Highway 89, following the route of his regular weekly run. He'd stopped at Pope's Beach, where the marsh had frozen and the waves of Lake Tahoe made a white icy froth against the sand. There was no one there. He'd driven on to Baldwin Beach, which was also deserted. Now, he turned into the Fallen Leaf turnoff. He drove slowly until he saw sand washed across the road.

He stopped and got out. He knew that the sand had come down since his last patrol, and he examined the tire tracks in it carefully. Then he went back to his car and drove on. He knew the look of everything here, minutely, and just as he was nearing the lake he stopped again. He stared at a garage, knowing something was wrong. Then suddenly he knew what it was: there was no padlock on the doors. He got out and opened them. The Chrysler was inside. He checked the license and registration. When he came out he was certain that he heard voices further on.

He drew out his pistol and walked on ahead, cautiously. When he rounded a bend he saw the camper with its aluminum housing shining in the sun. A small man in boots and western hat was ordering two dogs into the truck, face twisted with anger. Then a grey-haired handsome woman came around the camper and looked at him.

"What's going on here?" the patrolman asked.

Carl Miter told him.

Fifteen minutes later the area was alive with deputies and patrolmen. The bulk of cars had moved on to the south edge of the lake, to the parking area of a closed commercial lodge. Men had been sent into the brush surrounding the area. Others were slowly checking the homes built around the lake. And now the county sheriff, a small man with neat features and a gentle voice, was looking at Carl Miter and Mrs. Nivero with hard eyes, as Ernie Lang stood beside him.

The sheriff said to Miter, "Where did the dogs lose them?"

"Over there," he said motioning toward the west. "Around that falls over there."

The sheriff looked in that direction, where craggy mountains rose toward primitive wilds. Then he said to Ernie Lang, "Does he know

how to handle himself outside?"

Ernie nodded grimly. "I taught him quite a bit about that."

The sheriff turned back to Miter and Mrs. Nivero. "All right. We'll do our best. If you want to help, fine. But from now I'd appreciate your cooperation."

"He's a monster," Mrs. Nivero said. "He's got my daughter."

"I know that," the sheriff said. "And if you'd called us in instead of trying to take him alone, maybe we'd have your daughter back now. I'd advise you to work with us from now on." He turned to Ernie. "We're not going to take any chances with him, Mr. Lang. We can't afford to."

"I understand," Ernie said quietly.

"If you want to help too—"

"Yes," he said. "I will." He looked at the condemnation in Mrs. Nivero's eyes, then he walked back to Anna, who waited in their car for him.

BILLY LANG, urging Maria on, had followed a shallow stream, up, from the falls. They'd gone into the water, green and translucent as it rushed over gray rocks past banks thick with stiff brush and tall pine. They'd come out of the water three hundred yards upstream, feet wet and freezing; Maria was visibly trembling, white, her eyes feverish. They'd found a wooden bridge, which crossed the stream below a very small lake shimmering in the morning sun, its surface moving slowly forward as it fed the stream.

"I can't go on," Maria said.

"You've got to!" he snapped and pushed her ahead roughly. They went on, climbing up along a rocky walking trail, passing a yellow tree, cut and fallen, its bark and branches stripped, on past dry marsh-like grass, until at last the trail disappeared to a nearly indefinable path; only the wilderness was beyond this, Billy knew furiously. And then he saw it, just visible beyond the trees: a cabin.

He half-carried her toward the structure. He saw instantly that it was new, well-built and constructed for nearly complete privacy. The windows were shuttered, and both doors, he found, were locked. There were several logs lying nearby. He picked one up and lugged it to the back door. He rammed it against the wood again and again, until finally the lock broke and the door flew open.

The interior was compact and fully furnished. There was a living room, a bedroom with a bed neatly made up, and a small kitchen. He tried a light switch, and, in surprise, saw a ceiling light go on. He then noticed electrical heating units were built in the walls. He turned all of them on, and heat flowed out from the reddening coils. He went into the kitchen and opened three cupboards there;

(Please turn to Page 135)

THE LAST TO KNOW

by DONALD HONIG

Everyone knew Joe Raynor had a right to kill his rival. Everyone—but Joe Raynor.

WHEN JOSEPH RAYNOR alighted from the 5:07 and headed for his station wagon he suddenly had an idea. The idea stopped him in

midstride like a hand and he stood and thought about it for several moments, while the other disembarking commuters grooved around him. He pushed his hat slightly back on his thinning brown hair with his rolled-up newspaper and smiled rather abstractedly. Yes, he decided, it was a good idea. He would do it.

He headed for his station wagon now and got in, throwing his paper on the seat. Gloria would be pleasantly surprised when he brought home a bouquet of roses for her. She loved flowers, all flowers, but roses were her favorite. Raynor began humming to himself as he turned the ignition and piloted the station wagon out of the parking lot.

Getting the flowers meant going a little out of the way, but he didn't mind. Things had been somewhat tense between him and Gloria of late. What, precisely, the trouble was, he didn't honestly know. It had been a gradual thing, a slow accumulation of petty grievances that had finally carved a gulf between them.

It had started about six months ago. She began to become less affectionate, remote, no longer interested in him. At first he assumed it was a natural reaction after six years of marriage. He supposed Gloria became bored all day long with nothing to do except wait for him to come home. She did not mix well socially, for some reason, although she was attractive, intelligent and personable. A full day's boredom could dull the finest mind and finally affect even the closest relationship.

More than once she had asked him to let her go back to work, but he had refused. He made an ample living for them both, he insisted; there was no reason for her to have to work.

He thought about these things as he headed the car away from the route he normally took, driving away from town to the florist located out on a country road on the outskirts. The flowers would make her smile, and that would be a good thing. He wanted to remind her how much he loved her. Sometimes he thought that perhaps he was in some way responsible for the coolness between them; though Gloria, when he broached the subject of their growing estrangement, insisted there was nothing wrong.

Perhaps his mind was too engrossed in his thoughts, or perhaps it was his own carelessness: but whatever the cause, he suddenly saw the man in front of his car and the shock of it froze his reflexes for a moment.

By the time he hit his brakes it was too late. He felt the abrupt thud as the speeding station wagon knocked the man aside and Raynor had a vague sight of the man falling and crumpling as the car passed him.

He brought the car to a screech-

ing halt, threw open the door and ran back to the man. He was lying ominously still at the side of the road.

Another car, coming from the opposite direction, came to a halt beside Raynor's running figure, making him stop.

"Did you see it?" Raynor cried to the driver of the car. "He ran right out in front of me "

"I didn't see anything," the driver said, getting out.

Together they walked to the victim, who was lying face down. The other man knelt over him and touched a pulse. There was a long, agonizing moment while Raynor peered down. The stranger released the limp white wrist, looked up and shook his head.

"He's dead," the stranger said, getting up and taking a step back from the corpse.

Raynor looked at him with utter disbelief, then glared down at the man on the ground. As he stared at the profiled face his eyes dilated and then narrowed.

"Why, I know him," he whispered. "It's Bob Hawk. He's a friend of mine."

Raynor sat in complete dejection in an ante room in the police station, staring vacantly at the floor. In his mind he was reliving over and over the awful moment of collision. Where Bob Hawk had come from, Raynor would never know. Finally he admitted to himself that his mind had been wandering, that he had not been concentrating on his driving.

It had been terrible standing there, watching the white-clad attendants slide the sheet-covered body into the ambulance and drive away with it. Raynor thought of it now and covered his eyes, as if to conceal the vision from himself.

He had called Gloria the moment he was brought to the station by the police who had come onto the scene a few minutes after the accident. She had sounded quite distraught and promised to be there as quickly as she could.

A door opened and a patrolman motioned to him to come into an inner office. Raynor sighed and rose from the bench and followed the patrolman. He found himself in an office with a detective whom he recognized, Tom Alyer.

The patrolman left and they were alone.

"Sit down, Joe," Alyer said motioning to a chair.

"I guess I don't have to tell you how I feel, Tom," Raynor said taking a seat. "I'm utterly crushed."

"Are you?" Alyer asked.

Raynor thought he detected a slight edge of skepticism in Alyer's voice. The detective was sitting on a corner of the desk, staring steadily at him.

"Why of course," Raynor protested. "This is the most horrible thing that's ever happened to me."

"You mean it was a complete accident?"

"Of course. What are you implying, Tom?"

Alyer didn't say anything for several moments. He seemed to be weighing his words very carefully. His eyes remained fixed upon Raynor's face, steadily, thoughtfully.

He finally said, quietly, "Do you mean to say you didn't know?"

"Know what?"

"That Gloria was having an affair with Bob Hawk?"

"I won't stand for that kind of talk," Raynor said angrily. "What do you mean by that?"

Alyer turned aside and crushed a cigarette. He had gotten more than he had bargained for in this case. Of course he didn't believe Raynor's protestation of ignorance. Everyone in town had known for months what was going on between Gloria and Bob Hawk, who had been divorced some years ago. The neighbors knew, the people who frequented roadside cabarets where Gloria and Bob spent afternoons, knew. It was incredible to think that Raynor did not know about it.

Raynor was saying, "You've just made a very serious and insulting accusation. I'm entitled to an explanation."..

"That's the explanation," Alyer said. He felt quite uncomfortable. "They were having an affair. Everyone in town knew it. They were seen together everywhere. All the time. Do you mean to say you knew nothing about it?"

"Of course not," Raynor said hotly.

Alyer shrugged. He lit another cigarette.

"You'd better call your lawyer, Joe," he said.

Gloria arrived soon after. The moment she walked through the door Raynor knew it was true; the look she gave him was absolutely withering, filled with loathing and contempt. The question he wanted to ask her died on his lips. He had killed her lover. Her eyes told him that.

"Gloria," he said, rising.

"Why did you do it?" she said, her voice a tense whisper.

"But I never—"

"You didn't have to do it."

"In God's name, I—"

"I loved him," she said, her eyes burning.

He turned his back on her, unable to look at her, his hands opening and closing convulsively.

"Get her out of here," he said to Alyer.

Jacobson, his lawyer, arrived soon after Gloria left.

"You didn't know?" Jacobson asked.

"Of course not," Raynor said.

The way Jacobson lowered his eyes for a moment told Raynor the lawyer did not believe him.

"You knew about it?" Raynor asked.

"I didn't seek it out," Jacobson said, obviously embarrassed. "It came to me. It was common knowl-

edge. You know how this town is. There are no secrets. I noticed that things had been cool between you and Gloria of late. I naturally thought you knew what was going on."

"I didn't know," Raynor said. "But no one seems to believe me."

"I know. That's what makes it serious."

"What are you talking about?"

"The district attorney is thinking about charging you with murder."

Raynor spent the night in jail. Jacobson was having trouble raising the bail. Raynor told him to forget it, that he would rather not go home anyway. He was so dazed and bewildered, he said, that it really made no difference where he spent the night.

Jacobson said he was trying to get the charge reduced to manslaughter, because of the circumstances. When he mentioned something about the unwritten law—about a man being entitled to defend the integrity of his home—Raynor threw up his hands in helpless rage. His own lawyer was riding roughshod over his denials of knowledge about his wife's affair with Bob Hawk.

He hardly slept a wink. He lay awake on his cot, staring at the barred window, wondering how all this had happened to him. It was incredible. He felt no sense of satisfaction at having killed the man who was stealing his wife. The whole thing was too awful to feel

any satisfaction at all. He had killed a man. The man had been seeing his wife. And no one believed him when he said he hadn't known. It was too much for him to grasp all in one day.

The district attorney came to his cell the next morning to question him, in Jacobson's presence.

"You maintain you knew nothing about the affair between your wife and Mr. Hawk?" the D.A. asked.

"I knew nothing, absolutely nothing," Raynor said. "How could I? I was away at work all day."

"Now I want you to tell me this, Mr. Raynor: what made you drive on that particular street yesterday? It was well out of your way, wasn't it?"

"Yes it was. The reason I was driving there was to go to a florist outside of town and buy some flowers for my wife."

"Was it your anniversary?"

"No."

"Your wife's birthday?"

"No. I just wanted to surprise her. Things have been cool between us recently. I wanted to make some gesture."

"Why were things cool between you?" the D.A. asked.

"I didn't know. I honestly didn't know."

"Did you know that Bob Hawk often took that way home after closing his store?"

"I might have known. It never occurred to me. I wasn't thinking about Bob Hawk."

"But you ran him down."

"It was an accident."

"So you say," the D.A. said quietly.

"You won't admit you knew?" Jacobson said to him that afternoon.

"I didn't know. How can I admit it?" Raynor asked.

"It might make it easier for you. You're forgetting this is a small town, where everyone knows everyone else's business. No one is going to believe you. No jury will—"

"Jury?"

"The D.A. is charging you with manslaughter. I convinced him to drop the murder charge, but he means to have you for manslaughter. You have his sympathy, but he says he's obligated to charge you anyway. You'll have everyone's sympathy. We'll impanel a jury of local people. They'll know the whole story.

"Bob Hawk wasn't popular around here anyway. People never liked him. The way he treated the help in his store, the way he divorced his wife, his whole attitude —it will be to your advantage. We'll be able to get you off with a few years, maybe less. People believe in the unwritten law, they believe in a man's right to defend his home . . ."

Raynor listened as his lawyer droned on. Then he ceased to listen. He sat there, staring at the blue sky beyond his cell window, thinking to himself, *Even if I had known, I wouldn't have killed him. But I didn't know. I didn't. All I wanted to do was buy some flowers . . .*

A NEW COMPLETE LONG MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET NEXT MONTH

Cunningly, well had he hid his stolen stake to Tomorrow. Now—only Today stood in his way.

Sign of the Times

By GORDON R. PRESCOTT

HARRY BLYDEN wasn't a nature lover—far from it. In fact, his tastes ran more to beer, air conditioning, and the fights on TV.

Balding, pushing forty, and too

plump around the middle, Harry sweated profusely as he pushed his way through the scrub underbrush a few miles outside of town. The coil of rope slung over his shoulder and the short-handled spade dangling awkwardly from one hand added not a whit to his enjoyment.

Twice Harry paused on the way up the small rise, mopping his brow with a sodden handkerchief, peering carefuly behind him. Below, in the distance, he could see the metallic blue glint of his car, discreetly wedged behind a clump of alders.

It was pulled well off the rutted country lane that itself was seldom used—the quarry it served being closed. The main road, a quarter of a mile or so to his left, was likewise nearly deserted.

He heard a dull roar, and in an instant, directly overhead, a plane buzzed. His heart fluttered; they might be tracking him by air. He froze, but breathed again with relief when he saw the markings—*U.S. Air Force*—a huge jet flying almost at treetop level. He cursed softly, watching the plane retreat into the sun behind him.

Just ahead loomed a giant, gnarled elm, almost on the crown of the rise. That should be the one. Panting heavily from exertion, he sank beneath its comforting shade and let fall the shovel and rope. He wished now he'd thought to bring a canteen or something. He lit a cigarette, but the dryness of his mouth made it taste like burning sawdust, and he crushed it out.

He stood up and let his hands run lightly over the tree trunk, shoulder height. There it was, nearly overgrown, but still visible—the sharp zigzag he'd carefully carved almost sixteen years ago.

He sank back to the ground, grunting with satisfaction. His eyes closed, and his unshaven mouth broke into a toothy smile. It was so close now, the fruit of too many years of patient, almost endless waiting.

Sixteen years ago, almost to the day, Harry Blyden, along with his partners Mike Ross and Steve Nelson, had held up the Valley City National Bank. It had been a good haul—smooth, well planned, no hitches, no one hurt. Over eighty thousand dollars in used bills.

They'd split up right away, with plans to meet a week later to divide the money. Harry had carefully wrapped the bills in countless layers of oil cloth, sealed them in a leather suitcase, and buried the case in a dried-up well on an abandoned farm.

Two days later the police managed to flush each of them out. Mike was shot and killed trying to run, and Harry and Steve both got fifteen to thirty years for armed robbery.

Of course there were endless questions about the money. Harry'd played dumb: Mike had stashed it, he kept telling them, and of course

Mike was dead. Even Steve believed him, after a while.

He'd kept his nose clean in prison. The money would be there when he got out—paid for with fifteen good years of his life. It came to over five grand a year. And now, with Steve Nelson gone—died in prison of a heart attack—it was all his.

It would mean a fresh start. Mexico, maybe, or even Spain. No more hash slinging in a diner, like he'd been doing ever since he'd finally been paroled almost a year ago.

He'd played it cool—he knew the insurance companies were after the money. They'd nosed around, kept pretty close track of him for a while, hoping he'd lead them to it. But he was too smart for them. He was just plain John Q. Citizen now —a job, a room, a TV that was paid for, a little fishing on Sundays.

After a while they left him alone.

Still, he'd waited six more months, just to be sure. He'd bought a car, saved a little money even, became a paragon of respectability.

After fifteen years, what were six months more?

Harry heaved himself upright with a tired sigh. Fifty feet or so ahead would be another tree, with a similar mark. He didn't really think he'd need it, but he'd marked it anyway, just in case his memory played tricks on him.

And about one hundred feet beyond that was the well, partially filled in, and the crude vault he'd dug in the side, about ten feet down. It was going to be a damnably hot, dirty job . . .

A sapling sprang back, almost snapping the shovel out of his hand. He swore softly. Somewhere around here was that other elm. The bushes and undergrowth were thicker than he had remembered them.

There it was—a stump now, four feet across. Just where he remembered it. The bushes thinned out a little. It was just ahead. Sweat dripped from his face and neck, and his shirt and pants were soaked.

Somewhere above him another plane roared.

He broke through the last of the underbrush.

The well was about fifty feet dead ahead.

"What the hell?"

He'd run smack into a chain link fence, eight feet high, topped with barbed wire. A little to his left a sign read: GIBBON AIR FORCE BASE. U.S. GOVERNMENT PROPERTY. KEEP OUT!

Frantically he turned, sighting along his landmarks. It couldn't be —the farm, the well—there was some mistake But the fence was still there, and not ten feet ahead of where he was standing began the three-foot concrete thickness of the main east-west runway.

Featuring

MIKE SHAYNE

IN THE SHADOWS

He was very rich, very powerful—and very dead. And before that danger packed night was done Shayne had to find out why.

by BRETT HALLIDAY

MIKE SHAYNE stretched his long legs out in front of him, rested his shock of red hair against the back of the chair, and sighed contentedly. His last case work had been cleaned up for the day, the last rays of sun had just vanished into a deep purple twilight over Miami outside his window, and he held a glass containing four fingers of the best Martel cognac in his massive hand.

Shayne was feeling relaxed, peaceful, enjoying the fine cognac, enjoying even more the fact that he had nothing to do but watch the shadows slowly deepen over the city. A night of peace and quiet.

He should have known better.

The telephone jangled before he had finished one finger of the brandy. He let it ring through the second finger. Then he sighed a very different breed of sigh. He reached out and picked up the telephone.

"Shayne," he said wearily.

"Michael! Hurry, he's going to jump!"

The voice of his pert secretary

© 1965, by Brett Halliday

was neither pert nor efficient on the other end of the line. Shayne heard the edge of hysteria. He sat up in his chair, leaned forward.

"Easy, Angel," Shayne said sharply. "Give it to me slow and simple."

He sensed, rather than heard, the shudder at the other end of the line. Lucy Hamilton had been his secretary and good right hand for a long time. She did not panic easily, and now he heard her forcibly take hold of herself.

"Yes, Michael," her voice said, calmer now. "It's Mr. Benson. They live across the court, in the other wing. I've told you about the Bensons? He's that lawyer? I don't know them very well, but she remembered I work for you. He's out on the ledge. He's—"

Hysteria was rising in Lucy's voice again. She was fighting to control it, but Shayne could hear the panic pushing inexorably through again. He spoke slowly, softly.

"All right, Angel. They rarely jump right away," Shayne said. "Call the police. Tell them exactly what is happening. Is Mrs. Benson with you?"

"Yes. Michael, she says he locked the door to the bedroom. He's on the bedroom window ledge. I've seen him. Oh, it's terrible, he just stands there, looking down. I think he's drunk. He sways, he—"

"Calm, Angel," Shayne snapped. "I'll be right over, but you call the police first and—"

Faint, yet loud at the other end of the line, Shayne heard a scream. A female scream. Then Lucy's high, hysterical voice.

"He's going! Oh, Michael, he's jumping! He—he jumped! Oh!"

"Hold on, Angel. Call the police and an ambulance!"

Shayne swore soulfully. He hated suicides, fools who thought they could solve something by dying when all they did was evade the problem. He hung up and dashed for the door. He ran down the stairs to the side entrance into the garage beneath his apartment hotel.

Minutes later he was racing through the city to Lucy Hamilton's apartment building. He drove as fast as the law allowed, and a little faster when he thought it was safe. But fast as he was, the police were faster. He saw the detective car pull up to the crowd just ahead of him. Uniformed patrolmen were already holding the crowd back in the evening twilight.

Shayne parked as close as he could get, and walked quickly to the crowd. A uniformed policeman, who had been directing traffic, started to hold him up. Then the patrolman recognized him.

"Hello, Mike," the patrolman said. "I didn't know suicide was in your line. A client?"

"My secretary saw it all," Shayne said.

"That's rough," the patrolman said.

"Yes," Shayne said as he pushed past the policeman and through the small crowd.

The crowd was not large. It was almost dark now, and the body had landed in the inside court hidden from the street. Most of the crowd had no idea what had happened; they had gathered only at the sight of the police—ghouls, drawn by the uniformed evidence of disaster.

Shayne pushed through and saw Lucy, Lieutenant Oscar Hanley, three uniformed policemen, and a very pretty blonde. The blonde had to be Mrs. Benson. The man lying broken and very dead on the concrete of the courtyard was old enough to have been the blonde's father. Perhaps that was the reason.

Lucy Hamilton and the blonde Mrs. Benson were standing apart with a uniformed patrolman. Lucy, pale, obviously shaken, was trying to comfort Mrs. Benson. Lieutenant Hanley was looking down at the body. He saw Shayne walk up.

"They're always nasty, Mike," Hanley said.

Shayne looked at the pool of blood the body lay in, then up at the windows.

"Fourth story," Hanley said. "Landed on his skull and bounced."

Shayne saw the open window on the fourth floor. As he looked, a head poked out and Shayne saw the face of Sergeant Muncie in the last twilight. The shadows were thick in the courtyard, the window above black in the shade. It was more by his voice that Shayne identified Muncie. The sergeant's face was all but hidden in the growing dark.

"Room locked all right," Muncie called down. "Had to break in."

"No key?" Lieutenant Hanley called up.

"Not in either room," Muncie called down.

Lieutenant Hanley and Shayne

started to search the ground at the same instant. They had both had the same idea. It was Hanley who found the key less than two feet from the body.

"Must have had it on him," Hanley said. "We'll try it out, but it's pretty sure to be the key."

Sergeant Muncie's voice called down again. The night was fully dark now. "No note, Lieutenant."

Hanley nodded as if to himself. He looked toward Shayne where the big red-head was staring down at the remains of Benson.

"When they mean it, there often isn't a note," Hanley said. "It's the phonies who leave long notes. When it's real, half the time no one ever really knows why."

Shayne turned and walked to where Lucy Hamilton was still trying to comfort the sobbing widow. Mrs. Benson was still blonde, but she was not very pretty with her face streaked with tears, makeup and mascara. At Shayne's suggestion, they pushed through the crowd and went up to the Benson apartment.

"Can you tell us anything, Mrs. Benson?" Shayne asked gently.

The blonde shook her head. "No, Mr.—?"

"Shayne."

"Nothing, Mr. Shayne. I have no idea why Thomas would do such a thing. No idea—"

"Try to stop thinking, Alice," Lucy said softly.

Lieutenant Hanley looked uncomfortable, but he had his job to do. He opened his notebook.

"You're husband's name was Thomas, Mrs. Benson?" Hanley asked.

The woman nodded. Her eyes darted for one instant toward the open window. Then she looked away again.

"And you have no idea why he did this?" Hanley went on.

Alice Benson shook her head. "Thomas is—was a very successful man, a lawyer. We—we didn't always get along, but that is hardly a reason—"

"You never can tell about reasons," Hanley said soothingly. "They have to be a little unbalanced to do this, Mrs. Benson. Had he been acting at all strangely?"

"No—well, he had been excited," Alice Benson said. "I mean, he had been happier than usual!"

"Euphoric maybe? Manic?" Hanley said, more to himself than anyone else.

Shayne knew what Hanley meant. The manic-depressive was a prime suicide candidate. Up one minute, all the way down the next. On the down curve, the swan dive. It fitted, and Hanley had turned to routine questions.

The crowd below was going away, the fun over. There were only the police and the corpse. Upstairs, Lieutenant Hanley closed his book.

"I'll need both of you downtown

to give me your statements," Hanley said. "You both saw him jump?"

"It was terrible," Lucy Hamilton said. "Horrible, Michael."

Shayne nodded. "Try to forget it. It's over now."

But Shayne was wrong.

II

IT WAS the next morning. Shayne had told Lucy to take the day off, and he was regretting it. His coffee was cold and he had been answering unimportant telephone calls all morning. He had barely had time to read his paper, to note the small item on the rear page that told of Thomas Benson's suicide.

The woman who burst unannounced into his office was carrying the same newspaper opened at the same page. She was angry, so angry that her dark good looks did not strike Shayne at first. She threw the newspaper onto his desk.

"He never killed himself, peeper!"

She dropped into a chair and glared at Mike Shayne. The redhead raised a bushy eyebrow and tugged slowly on his left ear lobe. She was really a beautiful woman. Very beautiful. The Elizabeth Taylor-Vivien Leigh type, a little more like Vivien Leigh. Dark, green-eyed, imperious and slender, but without an angle to her body—all curves.

"There were two witnesses," Shayne said. "They saw him fly."

The woman snorted. On her it sounded pleasant.

"One of them I wouldn't believe on her knees," she said, "and your secretary must be blind."

Lucy Hamilton had been identified, of course, in the story. She had been a witness. The story said she was his secretary. He was sorry she'd been mentioned. He got enough crazy clients without advertising in the newspaper.

"He jumped from a locked room. Two witnesses," Shayne said. "You have to be playing a joke."

The woman frowned. "I admit that room has me stumped, but this is no joke. One hundred thousand clams is no joke, not to me."

Shayne leaned back in his chair and whistled soundlessly. He tugged harder on his ear. Large sums of money had a way of never being a joke, not in his business. He studied the beautiful woman.

"Let's start at the beginning," Shayne said. "Just who are you, and—"

"And what was I to Thomas Benson?" the beautiful brunette said. "I, Shayne, was the love of his life. The sun in the morning, and the moon at night. I was his sweetie, Shamus, as much as anyone could be. Tom Benson was not exactly a starry-eyed lover."

"What was he?" Shayne asked.

"A sharp operator, a smoothie,"

the woman said. "He'd been around; he knew what to do and how to do it. He got to me, and I don't come cheap or easy."

"I'll bet," Shayne said.

The woman shrugged. "It's okay, Shamus. I know what I've got and how to sell it. I'm a catch for anyone, Shayne. Tom Benson was no young Adonis, but he got me."

Shayne smiled. The woman seemed as forthright as she was beautiful. A realist—she probably had to be. Her face made her look like she had been raised in some aristocratic hothouse, but her voice and manner told a different story. Her voice said she too had been around.

"You still haven't told me your name," Shayne said.

"Mickey Adair," the beautiful woman said. "Cute, ain't it? It was really Mamie Krupke, but when I was fifteen I took a good look in my full length mirror and even I could tell I wasn't any Mamie Krupke. My first boss in a strip-club gave me Mickey Adair. I liked it."

"How did Benson, as you put it, 'get you'?" Shayne asked bluntly.

"How else? Money. Not that he was so bad, he wasn't. He was a swinger in a lot of ways, some even legal. That wife of his was too goody-goody for him. At least, until about a year ago."

"A year ago?"

"She got a playmate. Big boy named Russell Short. It's true love, I think, only Short worked for Tom, and that made it bad. I think Tom had something on the kid."

"You mentioned a hundred thousand dollars," Shayne said. The suicide was looking messier. A lover of Alice Benson could be a good enough reason for Benson to jump, but what about Mickey Adair? A man who had Mickey Adair would have a reason *not* to jump.

"That's right," the woman said. "Tom had a one hundred thousand dollars insurance policy in my name. It was sweetening, part of my price. Only they don't pay off on suicide."

Shayne rubbed his gaunt chin. It was becoming a very messy suicide. He tugged harder on his earlobe.

"So you don't want it to be suicide," he said.

"What do you think?"

"I think it's a good motive for murder," Shayne said.

His grim grey eyes stared hard at the beautiful woman.

III

MICKEY ADAIR shrugged. "None better," she said, "but would I make it look like a suicide and ruin myself?"

Shayne nodded. "All right. I know why you don't *want* it to be suicide. But that doesn't go far to prove it wasn't. What ideas do you have to make me think a locked

room and two witnesses are wrong?"

"All you want, Shayne," Mickey said. "First, he wasn't the type. Don't grin at me. Tom Benson was an ego-maniac. Look at me. He had to have me, and he got me, see? He went after things, and he usually got them. A man like that doesn't kill himself unless maybe he is really sick, and Tom wasn't."

"You're just guessing," Shayne said.

"So are you," Mickey Adair said. "Do you know a reason he would kill himself? Can Alice give you a reason?"

"No," Shayne admitted.

"Okay, then listen," the beautiful woman said. "Second, he had a big deal cooking. I mean big. He was excited about it, happy as a kid. He could almost taste it. I figure it had to hurt someone else, he was like that. He got a real bang out of pulling a sharp deal and ruining someone else. A man like that doesn't do a Brodie."

"What kind of deal?"

"Who knows? But it had something to do with a man named Luther Goode. I saw this Goode once, a little guy who was scared half to death when he came out of Tom's office."

"Was business good for Benson?" Shayne asked.

"Better than that, as far as I know," Mickey Adair said.

"Things change," Shayne said.

"Not with Tom. Some of his

clients wouldn't make the social register, or even make the human race if you kept good score, Mickey said.

"Criminals?"

"On the edge. And Tom knew a lot about them, if you get my point," the beautiful woman said. "There was one in particular I think he was real scared about: Joe Hanna."

Shayne knew what she meant by on the edge. Joe Hanna was a gambler, shady operator, suspect in half a dozen real crimes including a murder, but no one had ever convicted him for anything. No one had ever even arrested him for more than a gambling charge.

But there was the word, the word that Joe Hanna was a dangerous man.

"Hanna would scare a lot of people," Shayne said.

"You see?" she said. "Tom wasn't the type under any conditions, and he had a big deal cooking right now. At least one man was scared of him, and another man he deals with is a bad customer. There are two candidates for murderer of the month. On top of that his loving wife was cheating, and she knew he was cheating on her with me. Last, the boyfriend, Russell Short, couldn't take Alice because Tom wouldn't let go, and Tom had some hold on him."

Shayne was silent for a long time. Mickey Adair had, of course, not added the last possibility: herself. A woman who has $100,000 to gain from a man's death might easily stoop to murder. The suicide angle made it unlikely, but what if she had planned an 'accident', but had been surprised by the presence of Alice Benson?

The Adair girl could have planned it to look like Benson fell from the window. Without witnesses the police could not have called it suicide. There was no note. But none of it added up to anything but suicide when he considered that two witnesses had seen Benson jump! Unless—

He had to admit that Mickey Adair told a good story about a man with no reason to kill himself, a man who was not the type. And she had given out enough to make murder a possibility. He sighed.

"Are you hiring me to look further?" Shayne said. "Despite the witnesses who almost certainly saw him jump?"

"I am," the beautiful woman said.

"No matter what I find?"

"That depends," she said. "But okay, yes. I know he didn't jump."

"You think he might have fallen?" Shayne asked.

She smiled. "That would make it all simple."

"Wouldn't it?" Shayne said.

"Maybe someone was inside the room and he was so scared he climbed out to get away and fell. It's hard to tell a fall from a jump," Mickey Adair said.

"That would be nice for you. In fact, all you really want is for me to get the police to change the suicide label to an accident," Shayne said.

"I don't care how you change the suicide, just change it."

Mickey Adair laid two one hundred dollar bills on Shayne's desk, and left without another word. She left a smile that floated in the room like the smile of the Mona Lisa.

Shayne picked up the money and sighed again. Mickey Adair was not a nice woman, but she had made him wonder. Tom Benson, the way she painted him, did not sound like a suicide type. Maybe the police had doubts, too.

IV

WILL GENTRY chewed on the sodden stump of his black cigar. The Miami Chief of Police had listened to Shayne there in his big office, then had called for Oscar Hanley and the Benson file. Lieutenant Hanley looked at Shayne strangely.

"Your own secretary saw him jump," Hanley said, but there was something odd in Hanleys voice that Shayne heard.

"There isn't much difference between a fall and a jump," Shayne quoted Mickey Adair.

"Isn't there, Mike?" Will Gentry said. The Chief had swung around in his swivel chair to face his wide rear window with the bright afternoon sun of Miami outside. "I think there is, and I've seen enough of both."

Gentry leaned and took the file from Hanley. The gruff Chief opened the file and read for a moment. Then he looked up at Shayne.

"Here it is, Mike, your own words," Gentry said, and he read from the report sheet. "You reported what Lucy said over the telephone. The exact words were, 'He's going! Oh, Michael, he's jumping! He—he jumped! Oh—' You hear that?"

Shayne nodded. "That's what I remember."

"Listen to it, the time element," Gentry said. "Lucy said he was going to jump. Then that he was jumping, about to jump. Then that he had jumped. See? In a fall there isn't time to see anything before he falls. He just slips and goes over in an instant. That's the difference."

Shayne nodded slowly. Gentry was right. When a man is on a ledge and falls, it happens in an instant. But what Lucy had said over the telephone implied preparation. In short, a jump, not a fall.

"All right," Shayne said. "I think it was a Brodie, too. But let's go over it from all angles. Let's say what Lucy saw was Benson trying to move out of the way of someone still inside the room, maybe with a gun. And while he tried to maneuver he fell."

Lieutenant Hanley answered. "One, the room was locked; the key was down with the body. How did our unknown party get out of the room?

"Two, where was this unknown pursuer while the wife, Alice, was in the apartment. Inside the locked bedroom? Maybe, but those walls are thin. Surely she would have heard something unusual? Why wouldn't Benson at least call for help, or at very least say something his wife would have heard before she ran for Lucy?"

Gentry looked at the report again. "Anyway, the wife's story says Benson locked himself in the room, and she knew he was going to jump. He apparently said something to her through the door."

Shayne nodded again. Anything but suicide was looking worse and worse. Maybe Mickey Adair would just have to lose her $100,000. Maybe that was Thomas Benson's final joke on her. Not that this bothered Shayne much.

What did bother him was that he still heard an odd tone in Lieutenant Hanley's voice. A tone that he thought he heard echoed in Will Gentry's voice. The bluff Chief of Police was watching him strangely.

"All right, it has to be suicide," Shayne said. "But there's something bothering both of you. You've let me talk, and shot me down. But you've got some worry about all this."

Gentry was grim. The Chief nodded to Hanley. The tall, thin Lieutenant rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Well, Mike," Hanley said, "there are a couple of small things we don't quite like. They mean nothing by themselves, but with you questioning the suicide angle, we have to wonder."

"Small things?" Shayne said quickly.

Hanley brushed back his hair. "Just three. The collar of his shirt was torn a little, as if someone had grabbed his tie. Now that could have happened when he hit, or when he jumped, but it's not usual in a clean jump.

"Then, the Medical Examiner says all his injuries could be the result of the fall, but there is one deep wound on the back of his skull that isn't quite like the other wounds. We looked over the ground; there are loose stones big enough to have caused it."

"What was the actual cause of death?" Shayne snapped.

"Massive brain hemorrhage," Gentry said.

Shayne tugged on his ear. "You said three small things."

"The last is the most interesting," Hanley said. "Benson had a bruise on his chin. A pretty good bruise. Now this thing, the Medical Examiner says, would have been very hard to get in the fall. Benson landed on his head and backwards. Still, the ME can't say just when he got the bruise. It wasn't an old bruise, but he could have gotten it almost any time yesterday."

Shayne sat silent. Then he leaned forward in his chair and stared at Will Gentry. The Chief was studying his fingernails.

"Then we've got a possible blow on—" Shayne began.

Gentry broke in. "We've got nothing! What we've got is two eye witnesses, one your own secretary, who saw a man jump. Everything adds up to clear suicide, even that he went from a locked room. All we have against that is no note, three minor points that could be nothing at all, and your guess that Benson wasn't the suicide type."

Gentry shook his head slowly,

swiveled around again in his chair to face the window. "No, Mike. You know as well as I do that we don't really know anything about 'suicide types'. They come in all shapes and sizes, with every kind of motive. You know that in a four story drop to a stone courtyard, any kind of injury is possible, even the bruise on the chin. A loose stone could have popped up."

"Or he could have gotten the bruise ten hours before he jumped," Hanley said. "Maybe he did have a fight, and maybe that was one of the reasons he jumped. All we do know for sure, is that two people saw him jump! They actually saw it!"

Shayne said nothing for some time. They were right. No matter how he sliced it, the witnesses had seen. Maybe he would have doubts if only Alice Benson had seen it all, but Lucy had seen exactly the same thing. And yet, the hairs on the back of his neck seemed to move with doubt.

Less than twenty-four hours ago he had had a simple suicide; signed, sealed and witnessed. Now he had a client who was sure Benson couldn't have killed himself, and who had pretty fair reasons, at least psychological reasons.

And he had three minor peculiarities. He was gaining questions, not losing them. That was not how it should have been, not if it was suicide. His weak doubts should be getting fewer not multiplying.

Shayne stood up. "You're right, Will, sure. But do you mind if I nose around? I'd like to take another look at Benson's apartment. At least I might find out why he jumped and settle the whole damned thing."

Gentry hesitated. "Okay, Mike, go ahead. But be careful, okay? We don't want anyone getting ideas, especially the widow. And watch what you say. We do have slander laws. I don't want any charges of police harassment. City Hall doesn't enjoy that."

Shayne nodded again, and strode out. He would have to tread carefully. Will Gentry was involved more and more with politics these days, what with Miami growing like fungus, and he did not want to get the Chief in hot water at City Hall.

But the hairs on his neck needed better answers.

V

SHAYNE STOOD in the silent courtyard and studied the scene. The courtyard was in shade, the sun blocked off by the high walls of the apartment on either side. Shayne saw the wide stain of blood still on the stones. The stain was just where it should have been if a man had jumped from the window above.

Shayne looked up at the shaded windows. They were all closed now, and he could not be absolute-

ly sure which one was the death window. The windows above were fairly close together. He wondered if the Benson's bedroom had more than two windows. He was not quite sure why he wondered so much about that.

Then he turned and looked at the other side of the courtyard. Lucy Hamilton's apartment was one floor lower, but directly across from the Benson's apartment. Anyone looking out from Lucy's apartment could not have missed anything that happened on the ledge beneath the Benson's windows. And, again, he was not sure why he thought about that. There was something going around in his mind. Something someone had said. He filed it for future cogitation.

He looked at the ground again. There were loose stones, broken pieces of cement, the hard debris of any courtyard surrounded by apartment windows. There was an entrance to the basement close under the Benson's window, an entrance that went down a few steps and had an iron guard rail. It was possible that Benson's tie had caught on the guard rail, tearing his shirt.

On the other hand, it was still also possible to explain the three odd facts by some other road than suicide, and that Shayne did not like. Unanswered, and at the moment unknown, questions floated under his thick shock of red hair. He decided to have a look at the Benson apartment.

Alice Benson answered the door. The blonde looked like she hadn't slept for two days, but she wore makeup in a valiant attempt to look at least alive. Lucy was with her, seated on the living room couch. His brown-eyed secretary smiled at Shayne, sympathy on her pert face.

Shayne smiled in return, but his grey eyes were looking at the third party in the room.

Alice Benson's other guest was a man, a big man. Young and handsome, with the look of an athlete. The man both smiled and looked sad at the same time. His smile was open and simple, and his sadness seemed genuine. Alice Benson introduced him.

"This is Russ Short, Mr. Shayne. He worked in my husband's office, and he's a good friend," Alice Benson said.

"I try to be," Russell Short said.

"I hear more than a friend," Shayne said bluntly.

Alice Benson flushed, but Short did not blink an eye. The big young man looked like a lovesick puppy.

"Much more, Mr. Shayne. Now perhaps I can make her happy," Short said.

"It is easier to marry a widow than a wife," Shayne said dryly.

"Much easier," Short said honestly. "Everything has its good side, Mr. Shayne."

"Russ!" Alice Benson cried.

Shayne studied the big man. He liked Short. The man seemed honest and straight—but Shayne had met disarmingly honest killers before. Short still had a lot to gain, and Mickey Adair had implied that Benson had also had a hold on Short. It all added up to more than the usual size motive for murder.

"How did you—?" Alice Benson began.

"Mickey Adair," Shayne said. "She filled me in. You knew about her, I suppose?"

"Yes," Alice Benson said. "I knew some of it, not all. Thomas would never give me grounds for divorce."

"Did you want a divorce?" Shayne asked.

"Yes, Mr. Shayne, I did," the pretty blonde said.

Shayne changed course abruptly. "The Adair woman also says that Thomas Benson did not commit suicide."

Alice Benson blinked. "How does she come to that idea?"

"She bases her hunch on his character, on the fact he had a big deal cooking and was happy as a clam about it, and on the nature of some of his clients."

"Yes," Alice Benson agreed. "I would not have thought that Thomas would kill himself. He was very excited and happy; I told the police that. He does have dangerous clients, although I have no idea who they are. He never discussed business with me."

"He did with Mickey Adair," Shayne said. He had decided not to mention the $100,000 insurance policy just yet. If they knew about it, he would learn little. If they did not know, it could be a good surprise weapon later on.

"Perhaps he loved her," Alice Benson said. "He just owned me."

Lucy Hamilton had been ready to explode with indignation for the last five minutes. Now Shayne's pretty secretary burst out.

"Michael, we saw him jump! What are you talking about? He was here inside the locked bedroom, I saw him out there on the ledge, and we saw him jump!"

"I guess you never can tell about guys like Benson," Russ Short said.

"Probably not," Shayne agreed. "Still, I'd like to look around here

if you don't mind. I have police permission."

"By all means, Mr. Shayne, go ahead," Alice Benson said.

Lucy Hamilton was furious. "Michael! How—"

"Easy, Angel, I'm just looking," Shayne said, and his grey eyes looked at her. The expression in them silenced her. He saw her look curiously at Alice Benson as he went into the bedroom.

It was a smallish room with two windows. The one Benson had jumped from was closest to the door leading into the living room. Shayne studied the window. There was nothing unusual. He looked at the sill. He saw scrape marks, the kind that would be made by something dragging over the sill, such as shoes. There was also a faint black stain on the sill.

Shayne leaned out the window. The spot below, where Thomas Benson had landed, was just right for a man who jumped from the ledge in front of this window. The ledge itself was four feet below the window. A man standing on it would be about chest high if he were a six-footer, as Benson had been.

Shayne closed the window and looked at the room. He saw nothing of interest. Just a small well furnished bedroom with twin beds. There were no marks on any pieces of furniture that seemed fresh. He walked to the door. It was a standard interior door that locked on both sides with a simple lock. Not a spring lock, but the old key type. A man could have broken the lock with one good kick.

But, of course, there had been no man present last night, and the lock had not been broken until the police arrived.

Shayne returned to the living room, where Lucy was still comforting Alice Benson. Russell Short was leaning on the mantelpiece of the fake fireplace.

Short had a drink in his big hand, and the look on his face was as open as a book—Short wished that Lucy would leave, and let him do the comforting. Shayne could understand that.

He walked to the living room window that was closest to the bedroom wall. The window was quite close, no more than a few feet from the fatal window. It, too, looked down on the courtyard; the trip by ledge between the windows was no more than four feet.

Shayne turned and took one last good long look around the living room. Nothing appeared disturbed or new. A thick carpet covered the entire room except for a wide area of smooth stone in front of the fake fireplace where Short stood, his foot kicking one of the two heavy andirons.

Then Shayne noticed the andiron. The left andiron, the one not being kicked by Short. It was a dull black, exactly like its partner, except for one shiny spot near the

top. The andiron had been rubbed, rubbed hard.

Shayne tugged on his left earlobe. He did not go to the andiron, or indicate that he had noticed it. Instead he smiled and looked friendly.

"Well, it looks simple enough," Shayne said, smiling. "I better get back to more profitable work. Glad to have met you, Short. Take good care of Mrs. Benson."

"I intend to," Short said.

Shayne smiled at Lucy. "Come in tomorrow, Angel, and take your time."

"All right, Michael," Lucy said.

Shayne strode out the door. The instant it closed behind him the smile faded from his gaunt face. A frown replaced the smile. The andiron fitted the odd wound on Benson's skull, Shayne was sure of that. Yet it could mean nothing, a simple coincidence. Perhaps he could find out more in Benson's office.

VI

THE ELEGANT office of the late Thomas Benson was on the fourth floor of a new downtown office building. There was no police guard—the case was officially a suicide—and the door was locked. Shayne used his special ring of keys.

He closed the door behind him. He was in a darkened, windowless reception room. Empty benches lined the walls, filled with the ghosts of all the troubles that had sat on them. Rich, leather benches.

Shayne crossed the reception room to the door marked *Private*. Another door, unmarked, led off the reception room on the far side. That would be Russell Short's office.

Shayne opened the door marked *Private* and found himself in a large office streaked with slatted sunlight through the window blinds. There was a giant desk, neat and orderly. Two couches, leather, lined the walls, in company with assorted leather armchairs. Five large filing cabinets lined the far left wall.

Shayne walked to the filing cabinets. Somewhere in those files there could be the answer to a most clever murder. He opened the first drawer—and stopped. His hand on the drawer, the drawer open, he stood immobile. He listened.

Something had made a noise in the reception room. A sharp click, like a lock being picked.

Footsteps crossed the carpet of the outer office. Soft, quick footsteps.

Shayne closed the drawer silently and glided across the room. Despite his size he moved like some great cat. He opened the door that connected to the next office, and stood behind it with the door open a faint crack, the desk and filing cases in Benson's office in view.

He waited.

He heard movement, but for a long minute he saw nothing. Then a figure came into view. A small, slender man who stood over Benson's desk, looking down. For another minute the small man did nothing. The office remained dim and shadowy, with only the faint lines of sunlight through the blinds.

Then the small man began to open the drawers of Benson's desk. Shayne watched as the little man searched. When a drawer was locked, the man used an efficient jimmy to break the locks. The man searched thoroughly, carefully. Shayne watched.

At last the man stopped his search. He had opened each and every drawer. Whatever he wanted he had not found. Shayne saw him rub his chin thoughtfully and look at the filing cabinets.

The detective strained to see the man clearly, but the room was too dark, the man had not turned full face. All Shayne could see was a sharp, thin nose in a knifelike face.

The small man walked to the file cabinets. Shayne stepped softly out of the next office and glided toward the back of the intruder. He crossed the thick carpet quickly and silently, he wanted to see just who the intruder was. But he was not quick nor silent enough.

The man whirled before he was closer than three feet. Shayne had a flash of dark black necktie, two cold black eyes, and a sharp and narrow chin. He lunged for the small man. His big hand closed on the man's upper left arm. Then he felt a hand on his arm, and the next he knew he was hurled against the metal cabinets.

His opponent scurried away in the dim light. Judo. The small man was no amateur. Shayne regained his balance and leaped after the intruder. The man met him with a karate chop, but Shayne evaded and they grappled. Now Shayne had all the advantage with his size and weight.

He leaned down on the small man, who squirmed like a greased eel. There was no sound in the silent and dim office except the heavy breathing of the two antagonists. Shayne squeezed his bear-like arms around the squirming body.

The man suddenly went limp and dropped.

But it was not from the strength of Shayne's arm. It was another Judo trick, and the small man was gone from his arms. Shayne swore. The man rolled like a weasel on the floor. Shayne kicked out, and missed.

The little man was up and running for the half-open door into the reception room. Shayne pursued. The man slipped through the door. Shayne pushed the door farther open and saw the swift intruder just reaching the outside door into the hall. Once out in the hall the man could easily vanish.

Shayne jumped through the office door and was in the middle of the reception room before he realized his mistake. The little man had closed the outer door without going through it. His black eyes snapped coldly, calmly as he stared straight at Shayne. There was a pistol in his hand now, but it was not the gun the intruder relied on.

Shayne braked, tried to whirl, but there was no time. A heavy object smashed down on his head and he fell forward, his knees buckling. He should have guessed the expert little man was not alone. Someone else had been waiting in the reception room.

A second blow knocked Shayne to his knees and he felt himself pitch forward. Before he blacked out he heard the low, hard voice of the small man at the door.

"That's enough. Don't kill him."

And then it was all silence.

Shayne woke up in sections. He became aware that he was awake, but he did not move. Then he moved his hands and felt the floor. They had not even bothered to move him. He opened his eyes. The reception room was pitch dark. That meant that door to Benson's office was closed.

He moved his legs and rose to his knees, his hands flat on the floor to steady himself. His head rang like a gong, and it felt wet.

He stood, swayed, and held on to the receptionist's desk. He touched his head where he had

been hit. It was soft and wet. He could not see the color on his hand in the dark but he knew it was blood. He tried to think.

The small man had been looking for something. He nodded to himself, and the movement made his head feel like it was about to go into orbit. He steadied himself again. Then he remembered his thought about the little man and what he wanted. He walked carefully to the closed door into Benson's office and opened it.

The office was a shambles. All the file drawers were open, the files strewn across the room. The safe was open, its contents scattered in a thin pile in front of it. Among the materials were stocks and bonds, untouched. Robbery had not been the motive of the search; Shayne had not thought it had been.

He looked slowly around the office. A hopeless jumble. And then his eyes saw a single manilla folder lying on the desk. A bent folder, as if it had been bent lengthwise and folded. Shayne picked it up. A

rubber band lay beside it. He looked at the safe. To get such a file in the safe it would have to be folded in just such a manner. Something in the empty folder had been too important to Benson to be left virtually unprotected in a simple file cabinet.

Shayne guessed what it was. He had already made a guess at the identity of the slippery little man. The name neatly typed on the folder confirmed his guess: Joe Hanna.

Whatever Joe Hanna had wanted, he had apparently found it in the file in the safe.

And had left the folder arrogantly behind. Hanna was not afraid of anyone knowing he had worries, only of anyone proving what the worries were. Hanna did not care that Shayne or anyone else knew he had taken something from Benson's office, as long as he had it and no one knew what it was.

There in the office, the sun slanting low through the blinds now, Shayne considered his next move. He needed a doctor, and then he would have another talk with Joe Hanna. But not yet. Hanna would keep for awhile. He decided to try the 'big deal' next—Luther Goode.

It took the redhead only a few minutes to locate Goode's address in Benson's address book. Then he walked carefully from the silent office to find a doctor.

VII

LUTHER GOODE lived in a modest house in a quiet area of Miami. It looked like a street of respectable citizens, the kind who go to work every morning and their wives know that they will be home every night. Maybe a little better than working men, the owners of small businesses, like that.

Shayne sat in his car and smoked a cigarette. His panama fitted badly over the bandage which the doctor had put on his skull. The pain was all but gone, thanks to a sedative. The detective watched the Goode residence. There were lights in two or three rooms, the sound of pleasant voices talking.

He flipped away his cigarette and got out of his car. He crossed the quiet street and went up the brick walk to the pseudo colonial door of Goode's house. When he leaned on the bell, there was a sudden silence inside. Then he heard footsteps coming toward the door.

The woman who opened the door was a small, motherly type. Maybe fifty, maybe younger or older. Her grey, almost white, hair was set neatly and simply. She had once been pretty, but never beautiful, the prettiness only of being young and female and eager. The kind of girl most men marry and in five years forget what they looked like in the comfort of being cared for.

"Mrs. Goode?" Shayne ventured.

"Yes," the woman said. "Can I help you?"

"I'd like to speak with your husband," Shayne said, making his voice as official as possible.

The woman looked at the bandage protruding from beneath his perched panama. Shayne flashed his badge.

"Police business, Mrs. Goode, nothing serious," Shayne said.

The woman was a normal woman, she was not accustomed to dealing with the police. She was flustered and stepped back to allow Shayne to enter. The redhead strode into the living room where a man stood to meet him.

"Police?" the man said uneasily.

He was a small, rotund man of about fifty-five. His suit was grey and neat, but not expensive. It had been well-cared for, but it was a long way from the store rack. Everything about Luther Goode spoke of marginal business, maybe in a little pinch. Shayne was beginning to get the picture.

"Private detective, Mr. Goode," Shayne said, remembering Will Gentry's admonition. "I'd like to ask you about Thomas Benson."

"Benson?" Goode said. "Benson? What about him? He's dead!"

"We're not quite satisfied," Shayne said.

"Private detective?" Goode said. "I don't have to talk to you. Now—"

"Private, but I've got Chief Gentry's okay to talk to you," Shayne said, telling at least a partial truth. Gentry had said he could look into the case." I want to know about your deal with Benson."

"Deal?" Goode said. The rotund little man sat down heavily. "How did you find out?"

"We have ways," Shayne said.

The fat little man was not all jelly. His voice flashed anger when he spoke again.

"That Adair broad! She saw me, damn her. I was only trying to stop him. I begged him to let me alone."

"Tell me about the deal?" Shayne said gently.

Goode shrugged. "It wasn't really a deal, Mr.—?"

"Shayne."

Goode almost smiled. "Mike Shayne? I've heard of you. Why, it was your secretary who saw Benson jump!"

"The deal, Mr. Goode," Shayne said before the rotund little man got off on a tangent.

"Yes," Goode said, "well, as I said, it wasn't really a deal, at least not for me. I'm a small manufacturer, Mr. Shayne. I make small metal parts. About six months ago I got a fine order through a jobber. It was a very large order, bigger than I had ever had.

"Well, it required considerable tooling and purchase of metal

stock. I did not have the cash. The jobber advanced me a fairly large sum. That, too, is customary. Only this time the jobber suddenly told me, after I had bought the tools and metal, that I would not get the job after all, and that he wanted his money.

"What could I do? It was a small enough sum, fifteen thousand dollars, but much more than I had. I still did not suspect anything until Mr. Benson appeared and offered to give me the money for a half interest in my business. Then it became clear what had been going on. The—"

Shayne nodded. "The jobber was a put-up job. Benson was out to get your business all along. The big contract is probably legitimate, and you'll get it if you play ball with Benson."

"Exactly," Goode said. "And the job is legitimate. I have checked. It seems Benson had a hold on this jobber, but now that Benson is dead he's giving me time and the job."

"So all is well?" Shayne said.

"Yes, I'm clear," Goode said. "I've found out since that Benson did this a lot. Always very small businesses, not worth much, but he had his finger in many of them. It must have done him well. Very well indeed."

"It probably did," Shayne said, and he looked at the fat little man. "But you're safe now. In fact you'll do very well. You'll get that big contract, and without sharing with Benson."

"I certainly will! I—" The fat man stopped. His round face began to sweat. "What do you mean?"

"I mean it wasn't much money, maybe, but it was your whole business. That could be a good motive for murder."

"Murder?" Goode whispered.

"Why not, Goode? He had you cold. You knew that once he was in, he'd never let go. He could even have sold you out. He probably wanted a full partnership, maybe more."

"Fifty-one percent," Goode said.

Shayne said nothing. The sounds of cars on the distant highway were loud in the night. Somewhere nearby a child cried. There was laughter in a house along the quiet block.

Mrs. Goode had never sat down. She stood there and looked at her husband. Goode sighed.

"I read about the suicide and I was glad," the round little man said. "I was glad. Not just for me, for all the others he touched, but mostly for myself. I even had the thought that perhaps his conscience caught up with him. Perhaps he couldn't stand himself any more."

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. "Can you account for where you were last night?"

"What?" Goode said. "Last

night? Of course I can. I was right here at home. I was trying to think of a way out."

"Can you prove it?"

"Certainly. We had friends over. Five people saw me here all night," Goode said. He looked at Shayne.

"Are you really saying it was murder?"

"I don't know, Mr. Goode. But what you've told me doesn't sound like a man ready to end it all. He had you cold."

"But how could he be made to jump? Are you saying he was thrown out? He was a big man, Mr. Shayne. I couldn't even have lifted him."

Shayne sat up. *Thrown out!* The torn shirt; the bruise on the chin; the deep wound on the back of the head. And the marked andiron. As if it had been rubbed, cleaned. What if Benson had been already dead?

Shayne stared at Goode. The man was too small to have lifted Benson. So was Joe Hanna. But Hanna had big men working for him, big enough to lift and hold Benson on the ledge. He remembered the black stain on the sill, as if shoe polish had rubbed off. Lift him and hold him upright so that Lucy could see.

"Besides, your secretary and Mrs. Benson saw him jump," Goode said. "The paper said so. It said they both saw exactly the same thing. They—"

Shayne did not wait any longer. He did not run, but he walked fast to his car. That was what someone had said that he had tried to remember. Lucy and Alice Benson had seen exactly the same thing.

He remembered that now. He had said it himself!

VIII

LUCY OPENED her apartment door. She was surprised but pleased to see Shayne. The pretty brown-eyed woman stepped back and let the red-head enter. Shayne dropped his panama on a chair and stared around.

"To what do I owe this honor, Michael?" Lucy said.

"To a damn fool, Angel," Shayne snapped.

"Should I be flattered?"

"Maybe you should look for a new boss. I must be slipping," Shayne said grimly. "It was right in front of me all the time."

"What was in front of you, Michael?" Lucy said, puzzled.

Shayne saw what he wanted. He strode to the telephone and picked it up.

"This was in front of my face," Shayne said. "All the time!"

Shayne held the telephone. Then he walked with it as far as the cord would reach. He paced through the room, still holding the cord at its full length. Then he nodded and put it back on the table. He turned and crossed to the window that faced from the living room out onto the courtyard.

He stared up at the light in the window of the living room of the Benson apartment. Shadows moved inside the room. From where he stood the unlighted bedroom window was dark. He could barely see the glass shine. He nodded slowly, and turned to Lucy. She was staring at him as if she thought he had lost his mind.

"No, Angel," Shayne said. "I'm not crazy. Neither was, or is, Mickey Adair. She said he wasn't the type to jump, and he wasn't."

"You mean Mr. Benson?" Lucy said.

"I mean Mr. Benson," Shayne said.

"But I saw him, Michael," Lucy protested.

Shayne shook his head very slowly.

"No, Angel," he said, "you did not see Thomas Benson jump."

Lucy reddened. "Were you here, Michael Shayne? No, you were not. Well I was, and Alice and I both saw him jump! I stood right at that window and saw him standing out on that ledge. Alice could hardly look, she was so afraid. But I stood right there and saw him on that ledge!"

"Possibly," Shayne said. The redhead lighted a cigarette and sat suddenly relaxed, but he was not smiling. His narrowed grey eyes watched his confused secretary.

"Possibly you saw him out there, possibly you didn't," Shayne said. "But—"

"Michael Shayne, I saw him! Alice came in. She was almost hysterical. She ran to the window, and I joined her. We stood there and saw him right across the courtyard. Then she asked about you, and I went to—"

Lucy stared at Shayne. The detective tugged slowly on his earlobe.

"Yes, Angel, you went—where?" Shayne said.

"To call you! I was on the telephone! You know I was!" Lucy cried.

Shayne nodded. "You were talking to me. You couldn't have seen him jump. You can't see out that window from where the telephone is. You can't make the cord reach far enough to see the Benson's window across the courtyard!"

Lucy Hamilton sat down hard. "But it's all so vivid, Michael. I was sure—I can see him jumping now if I close my eyes. I remember the way—"

"Suggestion, Angel," Shayne said simply. "You're a volatile girl. Something horrible was happening. You had seen him out there, or thought you had seen him. Alice Benson was on the edge of hysteria, and you're very empathetic, Angel. When she screamed that he was going over, jumping, you just echoed her words over the telephone to me. That was why you both said the same words."

"But—"

"Don't blame yourself. It all happened so fast you couldn't really know what you saw. Alice screamed out the words, and you thought you saw it all, too. You had no reason either to doubt that she had seen it, or to remember that you hadn't."

"Oh, Michael," Lucy cried, and covered her face.

"Stop it, Angel. Have you ever heard the stories of eyewitnesses? Of course you have, a hundred times. You know how wildly different they can be. You were just sure you had seen him go. You hung up and ran to the window and there he was down in the courtyard. You saw him on the ledge, and down in the courtyard, and Alice supplied the missing moments!"

Lucy Hamilton sat there with her face in her hands. Shayne smoked and watched her. After a time Lucy raised her head. The look on her face was one of horror.

"Then," Lucy said. "Then Alice—"

"Yes, Angel, Alice had to be in on it. I'm not sure yet just what did happen, but I can make a guess. First, apart from your being on the telephone when he supposedly jumped, there's something else."

"Something else?"

"It was twilight when he was out on that ledge. In that courtyard the sun doesn't hit even at midday. That window was in deep shadow. It wasn't dark, but it was in shadow. You saw a man out there. He was a tall man, but I'm not so sure it was Benson. You didn't know Benson so well that

you could have been sure in shadowed light and under semi-hysterical conditions."

"Not Benson? I'm sure it was a man," Lucy said.

Shayne said, "Tell me one thing, Angel. Did you actually see him move out there?"

Lucy hesitated, her face concentrated in thought. She closed her eyes as if to conjure up the picture of last night's events like a movie in a darkened theater. Then she quickly opened her eyes again.

"No, every time I do that I can still see him jumping!" the brown-eyed girl said. "I must be terribly weak-minded, Michael."

"No, Angel, just very susceptible to suggestion. It doesn't surprise me. You're so sympathetic, soft-hearted. Now what about it? Did he actually move?"

Lucy nodded slowly. "Yes, yes he did. I'm sure of it, Michael. I really saw him look down, and—yes, he moved away from the light. I mean, I can see him actually moving out of the window area."

"All right," Shayne said. "That makes a difference. If my guess is right, the man you saw wasn't Benson at all."

"Who was it then? And how in the world—"

Shayne stood up and crushed out his cigarette. "Let's pay a call and find out, Angel. I'm a little curious myself."

IX

IT WAS RUSSELL Short who opened the door. The big man did not seem surprised to see Shayne. His eyes looked behind Shayne as if expecting to see someone, or something, else.

"Is Mrs. Benson here?" Shayne said.

"Yes," Short said. "She's here."

Short stood there for a long minute blocking the doorway. Shayne watched him. Short was big, perhaps a little bigger than Shayne, and broader, a lot younger. But there was a faint flabbiness about the man, as if he were out of condition.

"Do we get to see her?" Shayne said.

For a moment he thought that Short had not heard him. The big man blinked as if the sun were in his eyes. Short had heard Shayne. The big man was thinking. And then Shayne saw it. The faint flabbiness that showed Short was out of condition, also showed that he had once been in very good condition.

It was there in his stance, the ease and control with which he held his large body. Short had the body control of a much smaller man. There was a certainty in his manner as he stood thinking, as if he knew he could do what he wanted. As though he did not have to think of how to do something, but only whether or not he

should do it. And what was in his mind to do was stop Shayne, physically.

Shayne saw it—Russell Short was a trained boxer, fighter.

Shayne was sure of that. It was written all over Short as he stood there trying to make up his mind to stop Shayne or not.

"You don't want to hit anyone else, Short," Shayne said quietly.

The big man looked. Then Short stepped back, stepped to the side, his big shoulders sagging imperceptibly. "No," he said.

That was all the big man said, and Shayne walked past him into the living room. Alice Benson sat alone on the couch. All the lights were on. There were two drinks on the coffee table, and a bottle. The drinks had hardly been touched and the bottle was almost full.

"Drinking doesn't help, does it?" Shayne said.

Russel Short sat down close to Alice Benson. The big man touched her, put his arm around her, with a motion oddly gentle, light, for such a big man. Lucy sat on the other side of Alice Benson, watching her sadly.

Alice Benson looked at neither of them. The widow of Thomas Benson was looking only at Shayne.

Shayne stood and slowly paced the room as he talked.

"Do you want to tell it, or shall I try to tell it?" Shayne said.

"We saw you across the courtyard, in Lucy's rooms," Alice Benson said. "How did you find out?"

Shayne paced. "Some little things. A bruise on his chin, a torn shirt, a deep wound that was not quite like his other injuries. That and Mickey Adair. I'm sorry about her; she's not a nice woman, but she was right. Benson was not the type to kill himself."

"No," Alice Benson said. "Hurting others was his specialty."

Shayne nodded, paced. "Then, of course, I realized that Lucy couldn't have seen him jump. And then a man named Luther Goode showed me that Benson was not in any suicidal frame of mind. Goode also gave me the hint of how it was done, of what really happened."

Shayne stopped, looked hard at them. "I suppose it was an accident, more or less. Short hit him and he knocked his head on the andiron when he fell. There was blood, of course, but that stone in front of the fireplace would clean easily. There will be traces, I'm sure, on the andiron, no matter how well you cleaned it."

Short nodded. "I thought you saw that andiron. It was a chance we had to take. We thought the secretary of a detective would make a fool-proof witness. It was a chance. If we had been—more experienced, we'd have taken the andiron away."

Alice Benson took up the story

in a low, sad monotone. "He came in and found us here. He knew, of course, but he had never caught us before. He was awful, horrible. He used terrible language—foul, dirty. He said he would ruin Russ. Oh, I don't know, he raged like a drunken animal. I suppose he was drunk, just a little. I tried to reason with him, but he just went on calling me terrible names, saying he'd never let me go, he'd make me suffer, and—"

"And I couldn't take it anymore," Short broke in. The big man stood abruptly and began to pace the room with his fists clenched. "I hit him. I hit him hard. He went over like a ten-pin and hit his head on that andiron. He was dead almost instantly."

Alice Benson spoke rapidly. "The rest was my idea. Russ wanted to turn himself in, tell the truth, but I wouldn't let him. I thought of the suicide. I thought of Lucy, and her windows, and you. I—"

"No," Short snapped. "It was my idea, all of it."

Alice Benson would not be stopped. "I told Russ to climb out on the ledge. Then I ran to Lucy. I knew Russ looked enough like Thomas to be mistaken on that ledge in the shadows. First we cleaned up the blood, scrubbed the andiron. Then I ran to Lucy. You know the rest. While Lucy was on the telephone Russ threw Tom's body out the window. Then—"

"Then he locked the door from the living room side," Shayne said, "and just threw the key down close to the body. I noticed how close the windows are in the living room and bedroom."

There was a deep, tense silence in the brightly lighted living room. Short had stopped pacing. The big man stood as if frozen, looking down at his clenched fists. Alice Benson stared at the floor. Shayne pulled on his ear. Only Lucy Hamilton moved. Shayne's secretary seemed mystified, even angry.

"But, Michael, it was an accident, a fight! I don't see—"

Shayne sighed. "You know better, Angel. It wasn't a fight. Short hit first, there isn't a mark on him. Besides, even a fight killing is at least manslaughter-second, maybe felonious assault if the police believe Short."

"But isn't that better than trying to hide—" Lucy began.

"It would be, Angel, except I think Short knows it's a lot worse. You were a professional, weren't you, Short?"

The big man nodded. "Ten fights. I was just a kid. I always could hit, but I've got a glass jaw. So I quit and studied law. I've got a temper, Shayne, a bad temper. I was trained to use my fists."

"A professional fighter's fists are a deadly weapon, he can't afford to fight," Shayne said. "I guess it was something like that Benson had on you."

"Yes," Short said. "About two

years ago I got into a fight. I didn't kill anyone, but I knocked a man out, broke his jaw. I panicked and ran. Benson was there; he got the names of witnesses. He held it over my head. Oh, he covered for me, but he had the names and he used them. He was like that."

Alice Benson finished the story. "I knew Russ was in bad trouble; I wanted to help him. So we tried to make it look like suicide. I'd do it again for Russ."

"It's going to cost you," Shayne said. "It makes you an accessory."

Alice Benson shrugged. "I don't care. Without Russ, I don't care what happens to me."

Lucy Hamilton put her arm around the woman. Russell Short looked at the widow without anything in his eyes but love. Shayne went to the telephone.

X

IN WILL GENTRY'S big office, the gruff Chief of Police chewed on his cigar. Shayne was standing at the opened window. It was past noon of the next day.

"What can I say, Mike?" Gentry said. "They made it a lot worse."

"I know they did," Shayne said. "But Benson drove them. He was no good, Will, a man begging for trouble."

"Short's a fighter. They tried to conspire to cover it up. There are some pretty tough laws about that," Gentry said.

"Do you believe their story?" Shayne said.

"Yes, I believe it," Gentry said. "It fits."

There was a brief silence. Gentry looked at the soggy stub of his cigar.

"You did a good job, Mike. How did you rule out Hanna so fast?" the Chief said.

"Too open," Shayne said. "If Hanna had been involved, he wouldn't have ripped up that office so openly and left me around to tell it. The Adair woman had nothing to gain by a suicide cover-up. Luther Goode isn't a killer."

"Too bad about that Adair woman. In a way, she blew the whistle," Gentry said.

Shayne turned away from the window, began to pace slowly. The gaunt face of the red-head was set as if tasting something very bad in his mouth.

"And she gets out of it with one hundred thousand dollars cold cash," Shayne said. "She's not much better than Benson, and she

comes out smelling like a rose with one hundred thousand dollars as a keepsake."

"What do you want me to do, Mike?" Gentry said.

"Hold it down, as small a charge as possible. Make it manslaughter-second for Short, withholding evidence for the Benson woman. That way maybe they can find some life in three or four years. They made a mistake, no more."

Gentry sighed. "I'll talk to the DA. That's all I can do, Mike."

The redhead nodded. After a time he left Gentry talking on the telephone to the District Attorney. Gentry was trying. There was nothing else any one could do. He got into his car in the sunny street and drove home.

Mike Shayne was thinking about Mickey Adair and Alice Benson. It was not a very fair world.

Next Issue's Complete MIKE SHAYNE Long Novelet

THE GOOD CITIZEN

By BRETT HALLIDAY

Bad citizens gave Shayne more trouble than good. But both could be tied in very closely with violence and death.

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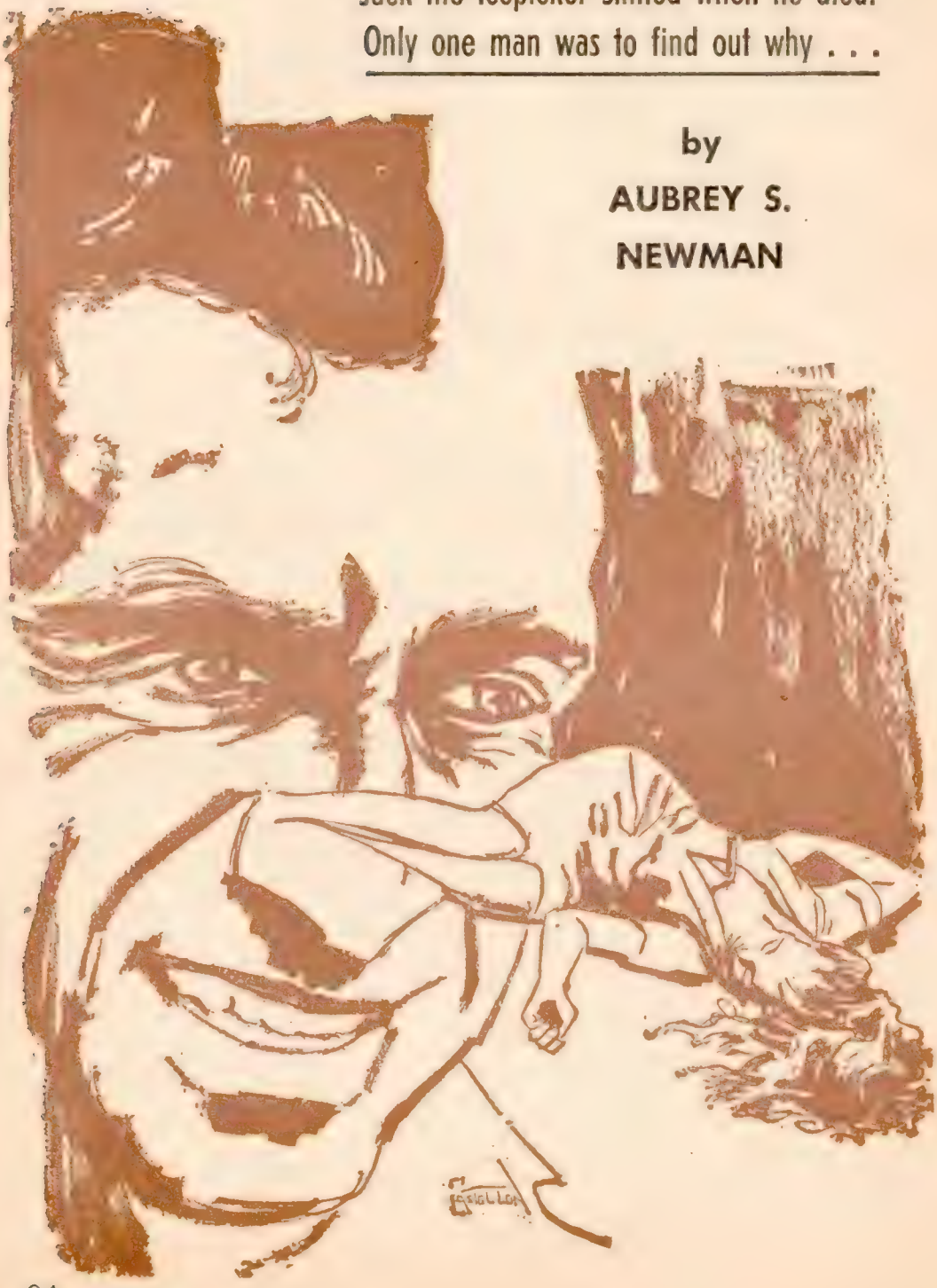
"THE DA VINCI AFFAIR"

Jack the Icepicker smiled when he died.
Only one man was to find out why . . .

by
AUBREY S.
NEWMAN



THE SMILE

NOT SINCE Leonardo Da Vinci painted his famous Mona Lisa portrait has a smile been so widely publicized—until the day Charles Bainridge, otherwise known as Jack The Icepicker, was executed. As a guard in the death house at the State pen, I had a ringside seat at the finale.

When I bring them chow and perform other chores necessary to maintain murderers at the prescribed standard of living on Death Row—until it's time to participate in legal procedures to kill them—I try to understand what makes them tick. Or shoot, poison, strangle, stab or whatever.

This Charles Bainridge was one for the books. I experimented with different approaches, but couldn't dent him. One day when I brought his breakfast I said: "Just imagine you didn't do those things. Also that nobody is going to do anything to you. Just enjoy this fine breakfast."

Know what he did? Scowled at me and snarled, "How would you like an icepick in your left ventricle?"

That didn't discourage me, however, because I like to see the humorous side of things. And my light remarks must have helped him a little, I figured, even if he wouldn't admit it, not even to himself.

Most people think my job would be depressing, but they don't have the right clinical attitude. Our capital punishment facility, with individual retention cells and modern electrical terminal equipment, is really a unique laboratory in which to study rats—human rats. If it had not been for my special laboratory interest, nobody would have

discovered why Jack The Icepicker smiled at death.

My analysis of his case began when I read lurid newspaper accounts of the first murder. It was clear the murderer should become one of our customers, though nobody had heard of Charles Bainridge then.

The body of the beautiful redhaired young actress was found in her own living room, with the handle of a dime store ice pick sticking out of the wishbone area in her chest at an angle that showed the point was in her heart. She had not been molested physically, and nothing was missing from her apartment.

Most of the reading public believed the murderer was one of her many suitors—until, three months later, a well known love story writer was discovered dead in the elevator of an apartment building in that same metropolitan city. With a dime store ice pick in her ticker. Also unmolested—and neither her purse or jewelry taken.

This sparked the first tingle of fear generated by chain murders, especially when victims are women. The Jack The Ripper idea. Was there a demented killer loose in the city?

Newspapers promptly dubbed him Jack The Icepicker.

His third victim was a popular TV entertainer, famed for the raven perfection of her hair-do in coiffeur commercials. She had been demised in the parking lot adjacent to her apartment hotel, with a cheap ice pick. And jewelry worth thousands was still on her body.

The pattern was clear: a pathological maniac with a "hate thing" against young women, especially those in the public eye.

Now Jack The Icepicker was national news.

I looked forward to meeting the gentleman, as he seemed destined for crime's Hall Of Fame, and I'm interested in celebrities in our field.

Fear increased in the city where Jack The Icepicker roamed, as months passed and the count mounted: four, five, six murders. Finally lovely little Corinne Calvert, debutante of the year, became the seventh victim. The usual ice pick in her heart, as she sat in an expensive convertible automobile in front of her family home.

Two things ballooned publicity. First, a news photographer got a color shot of the body, her long blonde hair haloed in disarray against blue leather upholstery. Second, Charles Bainridge was arrested a block away—with an ice pick in his pocket.

Police laboratory tests connected him with five of the six preceding murders. Also a neighbor of the Calverts identified him as the man she had seen under a street light as he walked quickly away from the scene of Corinne's death, shortly

before her body was discovered.

Charles Bainridge looked the part. He was tall and cadaverous, in his late twenties, with a gangling slouch. His large nose separated dark eyes under overhanging brows, while a pendulous lower lip gave his face the leering scowl that stared from front pages across the nation the next day.

It was soon noticed he never smiled. This was played up by writers, who had a field day with such descriptions as "the chilling mask of his face", and others.

In record time Charles Bainridge went before a jury of his peers, charged with murder of Corinne Calvert. He did not take the stand in his own defense.

Millions followed the trial in print, step by step, with their morning coffee. Finally black headlines announced:

Jack The Icepicker Smiles!

One reporter had secreted a camera into the courtroom. The picture showed that usually glowering face distorted by a curiously enigmatic smile. Like the controversial Mona Lisa, his eyes seemed to stare out coldly, while his lips twisted in a faint but definite smile.

It happened at the climax of the State's summary when the prosecutor lifted a large color photo for the jury to see, and said:

"Look at the blonde innocence destroyed by this monster . . . Justice cries for the death penalty!"

It was then Charles Bainridge smiled.

Like everybody else, I wondered what could be funny about hearing the prosecutor demand you be done to death with an artificial thunderbolt of generated electricity.

Of course I had no idea my interest in Jack The Icepicker would discover the answer. But before the smiling mystery was solved it would become more dramatic.

After the death sentence was pronounced, he was moved to Death Row.

The head shrinkers said he was sane. To me, however, an unnatural light burned in those dark eyes under their heavy brows. There sure was no smile there, as far as I could see.

After they got through all the "stays of execution" and "appeals" and what not, the day finally came to quit talking and loose the thunderbolt. I'm one of those to escort him to his final launching pad into the hereafter. Still trying to keep things on the light side, I said: "Well, Jack, this is a nice day for it."

Know what he says? You'd never guess: "How would you like an ice pick in your right ventricle?"

Then he just clammed up. Seemed to be thinking of other things.

The usual group of witnesses were there, and care was taken to prevent photographs. But again a

newsman got his picture, apparently with a miniature camera hidden somewhere on his person—the kind perfected for intelligence agents.

And it caught the last smile of Charles Bainridge, seconds before the black hood dropped over his face and he died.

The eyes in this photo again looked out coldly from under beetling brows, while his lips writhed into that curious smirking mirthless smile.

Millions of newspaper readers asked the question, "What is he smiling about?"

Like always, there was nothing funny about an execution, but he did smile.

Of course writers who pontificate on such things guessed and speculated about why he smiled. Defiance or bravado? Nervous reaction or fear? Nobody knew.

But the reading public soon learned the answer. Thanks to my murderer watching hobby in general, and my special interest in Jack The Icepicker. It was the final fillip to lurid titillations in print.

Anyway, after "lights out" for Jack The Icepicker, I went back to his cell to collect his personal belongings and turn them in. The first thing I find is this note to me:

Dear Screw Jonesy:

You are puzzled about why I smiled on hearing the Death Penalty asked for me. Because I think you really are interested, I'll tell you.

When I take my last walk, if I let my mind dwell on the electric chair, it will increase my fear. So I'll force my thoughts into memories like those supposed to flash behind the eyes of a drowning man.

I will recall how the pretty little red-haired actress died. Then relive catching the cute brown-haired writer in the elevator—followed by surprising the TV performer with the fancy hair-do, on through number six, who I will icepick again in memory as they fasten the leg electrodes.

Then my mind will jump to my trial when the prosecutor said: "Look at the blonde innocence . . . Justice cries for the death penalty!"

I'll remember I smiled—and why. And smile again. Because none of my six murder victims were blondes, and I did not murder the seventh—for which I will have been executed when you read this.

I never saw Corinne Calvert, and would not have been interested if I had.

You see I just don't like blondes.

JACK THE ICEPICKER

P.S.

If I did it, how was the ice pick in my pocket when arrested? Even "smart" cops

should realize I didn't carry two of them.

There was a real newspaper hullabaloo when the police finally nabbed the real murderer of Corinne Calvert—who confessed, and admitted trying to make it look like a Jack The Icepicker job.

That closes my report on this Death House laboratory case history, but leaves me with a new question:

Could the Mona Lisa too have been smiling with her lips and glaring with her eyes at the travesty of justice in false accusation—yet unable to defend herself because of a guilty conscience?

COMPLETE—NEXT MONTH—TWO EXCITING NOVELETS

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Solve—if you dare—the deadly riddle of the five power lusting captains of industry who had so much to live for that they killed—and were killed—to get it.

THE AGENTS

An Amazing Spy Novelet

by MAX VAN DERVEER

When the trouble started it could have been one of many things—a spy network conspiracy, hoods erasing an annoyance or . . . a passport to hell for Agent Kevin Kar.

Featuring

SCOTT JORDAN

Widow in Waiting

A slick chick nearly got him into a hole—six feet under.

by HAROLD Q. MASUR

THE LADY'S husband, it seems, was indulging in a little extra-curricular activity, though why a man should stray from the fireside with such nice homework around was more than I could figure.

The homework sat in the red leather client's chair across my desk, taking me in with turquoise eyes that moved languorously under canopied lashes. Red hair framed a regal face with a faintly amused mouth. She was wearing one of those knitted outfits that clung to her figure like a coat of paint. It was a figure that could raise a man's temperature to fever pitch.

She was Mrs. Ivy Strickland, out of Park Avenue by way of Hackensack—calm, assured, and a little careless about dumping her ashes in the tray.

"I know Claude is seeing another woman," she said in a deep contralto. "I've been aware of it for some time."

"How?" I asked politely.

"Oh—" she waved airily—"a woman can tell."

I looked at the man beside her. "You know how I feel about messy divorce cases, Owen."

"Sure," he said. "But everybody makes exceptions."

"This is a bad time for it.

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They're cracking down on lawyers and crooked private detectives."

Owen smiled. "Exactly. That's why we want a lawyer with an impeccable reputation. Everyone knows that Scott Jordan wouldn't touch a case tainted with suspicion."

It was oil out of the can and he knew it. He realized, too, that it would be hard for me to refuse. Owen Lang was an accountant, a tax expert. We'd worked together on some rebate cases and he'd brought some good clients into the office. You have to take the bad with the good. He probably thought he was doing me a favor by bringing Mrs. Strickland in.

"Another thing," Lang said. "Money is a minor consideration. Mrs. Strickland won't quibble about a fee. Charge whatever you believe it's worth."

The money helped clinch it. Some rapid rationalization helped, too. Getting a woman her freedom from a No-Good husband is really an act of benevolence, I thought.

"Okay," I said. "Let's have the facts."

His smile widened. Owen Lang was a handsome party in a rugged, loose-jointed way. "It's the usual triangle, Scott. Claude Strickland and his secretary."

"How do you know?"

"Mrs. Strickland's been following them. They meet once a week in the Hotel Boncourt. Usually Wednesday nights."

"This is Wednesday," I said.

He nodded. "Exactly."

"You mean tonight?"

"Why not?" Mrs. Strickland asked. "The sooner, the better."

"Are you certain he'll be there?"

"Yes. He phoned he'd be home late. Business." The last word was accompanied by a contemptuous snort.

"Good enough," I said. "There'll be a raid."

"You know what he looks like?" Owen asked.

"Who doesn't?" I said.

Claude Strickland had been on the stage for a good many years. He'd once had a fat role in a long run musical comedy. And a crack at Hollywood. But finally realized he wasn't getting anywhere as an actor.

So he'd severed his relations with the entertainment end of the business and entered the exhibiting end, buying a theatre chain with a man named Ulpio Balado. Strickland & Balado. Two first-run movies and a dozen neighborhood houses.

"Will you want a retainer?" Mrs. Strickland asked.

"Yes," I said, testing her. "Five hundred dollars."

She scribbled the check without debate. "May I volunteer some information? Claude usually reserves the same room every week. Number seven hundred twenty-five."

"And he usually gets there about ten," Owen said.

All this was nice to know because it simplified the job. I accepted the check and divided a smile between them and convoyed them to the door.

It seemed like the architects had searched for a musty smell and then built the Boncourt around it. Or maybe the structure was just old. From its revolving door a silk-thin rug rambled across an acre of chandelier-illuminated lobby. Potted palms drooped here and there. Ancient inhabitants drowsed in faded chairs. It was all as peaceful as a game of cribbage with your maiden aunt.

Shortly after ten o'clock I stepped into the elevator. It was one of those open front, iron-grill cages. Max Turner was at my heels. Max was a private detective who had helped me on a number of jobs. He had an anonymous face and a card-index memory. He was one of the best leg-men in the business. A young assistant of his was trailing along as a witness.

The hallway was wide enough for a brace of elephants. Number 725 was at the end of the corridor.

I didn't bother with a skeleton key. There is a certain type of lock that generally yields to a simple trick. You turn the knob, put your shoulder tight against the door, and heave sharply. If you have the knack, it springs the latch and sends the door flying.

I followed the formula. The trick worked fine and the door flew open. Momentum carried me halfway into the room. Sudden shock stopped me short.

The charge didn't surprise Claude Strickland. Nothing would surprise him any more. He was through with all of that.

He lay crossways on the floor, wearing checkered pants and a chestful of black hair. One side of his classic profile was intact. The other side was something else. It was the face of a blind steer who'd charged into a brick silo.

I jumped back and blocked the door. I straight-armed Max Turner into the corridor.

"Go home," I said, in an off-key voice.

"What?"

"It's all off," I said. "A bust. Go home."

Perplexity wrinkled his forehead. "What's the matter with you, counselor?"

"Max," I said, swallowing hard, "it's better this way, believe me. Don't argue. Bail out. You didn't see anything. You didn't hear anything. You don't know anything. Get lost, Max. Please!"

I closed the door in his face. Why drag Turner into it? He was an innocent bystander. No need for him to spend the night down at headquarters trying to explain something he knew nothing about.

I turned and had another look at Claude Strickland.

The gun was in his right hand. It had been fired into the side of his

head. Powder gas had chased the bullet into the wound, expanding and tearing out a ragged hole. Blood stained the whole side of his face.

I looked at the gun, but I didn't touch it. A .32 caliber Colt Banker's Special, short, snout-nosed, lethal. An elephant gun might have done worse damage but it couldn't have made him any deader.

It was supposed to look like suicide.

Only somebody had bungled.

It wasn't suicide. Not with the gun in his right hand and the bullet hole in his left temple. Mrs. Strickland wouldn't need any divorce now. A good thing I had cashed her check that afternoon.

I made a quick survey. The room held three doors. Two closets and one door leading into the bathroom. It was one of those adjoining bathrooms, shared by the room on the other side, privacy being insured by a door kept locked with a hook and eyelet device.

I went back and reached a reluctant hand for the telephone.

YOU CAN SKIP the next two hours, what with the lab boys, the medical examiner, and the D.A.'s assistant. Then I was alone with Detective-lieutenant Nola.

Nola was a slender man, dark-skinned and dapper, with quiet brooding eyes, and a quick mind. He sat on the edge of the bed and said, "Okay, Jordan. I'm listening."

"You heard me tell it to the D.A.'

"You didn't tell all of it, boy. You're holding back."

Lying to Nola would get me nowhere, so I decided to tell him the truth.

He made a distasteful mouth.

"A divorce raid. You! I'm surprised, Jordan." He folded a hand over his chin. "Any ideas?"

"Yes. This job was pulled by an amateur, in a hurry to kill and clear out. Bad planning, bad execution. Witness the gun on one side and the bullet hole in the other."

"No trace of the girl when you got here?"

"None. What does the desk clerk say?"

"Strickland was alone when he checked in."

"Maybe the girl was supposed to meet him here."

"Maybe. You know her name?"

I shook my head. "The widow probably does."

"The widow is at an opera party. We can't locate her." He regarded me steadily. "What do you know about her?"

"Dynamite, Lieutenant. Thirty years younger than the deceased and really constructed."

"An old man and a young wfie. That means she married him for his dough." Nola's bottom lip bulged thoughtfully behind his tongue. "It shapes up peculiar. Why would she divorce him just because of this?" His gesture embraced the room.

"There's her pride," I said. "There's alimony or a cash settlement. Could be there's another boy friend."

"Okay. Okay." He turned wearily and headed for the door.

I followed him to the elevator. He was silent all the way down. When we reached the street he paused to deliver a brief but trenchant lecture on steering clear of police business, emphasizing each point with a rigid finger jabbing my breastbone.

Then he ducked into a squad car parked at the curb. The driver took it past a red light as if he was color blind, splitting all the traffic in half.

I went back into the hotel and the nearest telephone booth and dialed Owen Lang. He was home. "Well, Scott, how did it go?"

I ignored the question. "Owen, I need some information."

"Shoot."

"Who's the auditor for Strickland and Balado?"

"Me."

"Is the firm solvent?"

He hesitated. "Well, Scott, it's no secret. They're on the rocks."

"Will they ink?"

"Looks that way. Unless one of them suffers a heart attack. There's partnership insurance, one hundred thousand dollars worth. Plus double indemnity except in the case of suicide."

"I see. Give me a line on Strickland's secretary."

Lang laughed briefly. "Nice, isn't she? Name's Violet O'Hara. Lives at the Milton. But you won't get to first base, Scott, I know. I tried—Say, what is this? Why all the questions?"

I mumbled an excuse and broke the connection.

Ulpio Balado had an apartment on Central Park South. He was a man who had a finger in many pies. We knew each other casually from some corporate reorganization meetings. Recognition and surprise mingled on his face when he opened the door.

"Good evening," I said. "Business. May I come in?"

He led me into a wide living room, planted his feet apart on a camel's hair rug and lifted bushy eyebrows over questioning eyes. A thick man, built low to the ground,

with tiered chins and a forehead that reached all the way back to a fringe of sparse hair, with a face dyed ox-blood by unrestricted Scotches.

I said, "So you're in business by yourself now."

"I beg your pardon."

"The partnership. Strickland and Balado, it's finished."

A double wrinkle of puzzlement dented the bridge of his nose. "What are you talking about?"

"A corpse," I said. "A corpse with a bullet hole in his head. I'm talking about murder. The murder of Claude Strickland."

His mouth fell open and he groped at a chair for support. A gasp caught at his thtoat. This, I thought, is acting in the grand tradition. Strassberg and The Method. He worked his voice into a squeak.

"Strickland dead! How? When? Where?"

I answered categorically. "Shot. Tonight. In a hotel room."

Balado sank back against a nest of pillows on the sofa. He swallowed enormously. "Who—who did it?"

"That's what I'm going to find out." I towered over him. "I'm looking for a motive. I think I found one. You were his partner in an almost bankrupt business. There was insurance, a hundred thousand dollars worth. How's that for a nice fat slice of motive?"

His fingers flattened across his chest. He smiled at me like a man with the mumps. "Me? You think I killed Strickland?"

"Why not?"

He shook his head. "But there was another policy, the same amount, for his wife."

"So what? You still had a business to protect. And you probably knew where he could be found tonight."

"You're wrong, Jordan." His tongue rubbed over parched lips. "A hundred thousand dollars wouldn't be enough. It would just about buy out the wife's interest."

"Two hundred thousand," I corrected. "Double indemnity for death by violence."

His bushy eyebrows quivered as he said, "Only in the case of murder. Not if it was suicide. Strickland did it him—" Balado broke off, snapping his jaw shut. He shriveled back against the sofa, frightened.

I reached down and collected a handful of smoking jacket and pulled him close. "How did you know about suicide?"

He made incoherent noises and his eyeballs floated in quick moisture.

I shook him. "Nobody said anything about suicide, Mr. Balado. Yet you know. You know because you were there."

His lips moved soundlessly.

"Talk," I insisted. "How did you know?"

His mouth opened and then, suddenly, the telephone was ring-

ing. I listened for a moment. I released him. "Go ahead and answer the thing."

The telephone was in the bedroom. He stumbled through a door on the right. The ringing died when he lifted the receiver.

"Hello," I heard him say. "Hello. This is Balado speaking."

And that was all he said. Whoever was on the other end of the line did most of the talking, did it all, in fact. Not another syllable came out of Balado. More than a full minute passed before I got it. Then I catapualted toward the bedroom.

But it was too late. He was gone. The handset dangled off the night table at the end of its cord. I yanked at doors until I found one that led through a hallway out of the apartment. The hallway was completely deserted.

The fool! How far did he think he could get?

It must have been panic that sent him flying. Or maybe he needed a little time to think.

I took the elevator down, but the doorman hadn't seen him. I sighed and flagged a cruising cab and told the driver to take me to the Milton.

Violet O'Hara answered my knock. She was something to see, a slender girl with dark hair and pale face, and enormous eyes that were trying hard to look casual. They weren't succeeding. They were moist and apprehensive.

I gently led her back into the room and closed the door, not giving her time to think. "All right. Miss O'Hara, what happened tonight?"

"Tonight?"

"At the Boncourt."

"I—I'm afraid I don't understand."

I shook my head. "That won't do, Miss O'Hara. We know all about Strickland and the divorce, about you, too. Everybody's talking. Don't get left behind."

Her lips trembled—tears glistened in her eyes. The hard core that had formed inside me began to melt.

"Did you kill him?" I asked softly.

"No! Oh, no!"

"But you were with him tonight."

She took a deep breath that shivered on the way down. Her eyes searched mine and seemed to find confidence.

"Yes," she nodded. "I was with him."

"Were you in love with Strickland?"

"Oh, no. It wasn't like that at all."

"Suppose you tell me how it was."

She selected her words carefully. "Mr. Strickland asked me to do him a favor. He said he was going to get a divorce and he needed help."

"You knew there was to be a raid?"

"I—I guess so."

"You weren't afraid of your reputation?"

Her eyes were wide and innocent. "He said my name would never come into it."

"So you went?"

"Yes. I liked Mr. Strickland. He'd been very kind to me. He even loaned me money once when I needed it badly. He was unhappy and I wanted to help him. His wife was running around with another man. They had decided on a divorce and this was the least I could do."

"Go on from there. What happened?"

The recollection was painful. "I went to the Boncourt. I got there at seven o'clock. Mr. Strickland was waiting for me. He'd been drinking from a pocket flask he always carries and he was a little drunk. He offered me some. I don't like liquor. But he was very insistent. So I had a swallow." She covered her eyes with her hands.

"Things grew hazy. Something happened to me. I think I fell asleep. The next thing I remember I was sitting up, staring at him." Her voice went down to a flat, awed whisper. "He was dead. He'd been shot and the gun was in my lap. I didn't know how it got there. I was very frightened. I—I was afraid they'd blame me."

I said quietly, "So you put the gun in his hand to make it look like he had committed suicide. That was damned foolish."

She nodded wordless.

"Now, tell me—" I started, but the doorbell rang just then, cutting me off.

Violet O'Hara went rigid. She clutched at my sleeve, sudden fear warping her mouth. Her eyes appealed to me.

I loosened her fingers gently. "Go see who it is."

She went to the door and opened it and two men stepped inside.

"Headquarters, miss," one of them said. "You're wanted downtown."

She turned slowly, perplexity joining the fear on her face. Her finger pointed at me. "But this man says he's a policeman, too."

The plainclothes man put a pair of hard eyes straight at me.

"She's mistaken," I said. "She drew the conclusion herself."

"You' better come along with us too."

EVERYONE WAS deployed around Lieutenant Nola's office. Ivy Strickland sat wet-eyed on a straight-backed chair. Owen Lang was standing with grim soberness behind her. A young policeman held Ulpio Balado vertical in front of the desk. Violet O'Hara stood there, looking pale and resigned.

"Jordan," Nola said coldly, "didn't I tell you to stay out of it?"

"How could I, Lieutenant? I was in it up to my neck. Where did you find Balado?"

"In his apartment. Why?"

"He must have sneaked back. He ran away from me."

Nola was a man driven to exasperation, but containing himself with difficulty. "So you were there, too?"

"Yes, sir."

"And maybe you solved the case," he said sarcastically.

"Yes, sir."

His jaw dropped and then his eyes narrowed skeptically. "Well, who is the killer, then?"

"A question first," I said, and looked at Balado. "How did you know about suicide?

He laid his ears back like a mule and his eyes went stubborn. He wasn't talking. Nothing could make him talk.

It was Violet O'Hara who spoke. "I told him," she said. "I phoned him when I left the Boncourt. I had to tell someone and I thought Mr. Balado ought to know."

The picture focused for me when I saw how he looked at her, like she was Joan of Arc. Ulpio Balado, short, fat, and balding, was in love with Violet, and nobody could make him say anything that hurt her.

"That clears the decks," I said. "Now we're stripped for action." I faced Nola. "Has Strickland been posted yet?"

"Tomorrow morning. But I don't need the medical examiner to tell me what killed him."

"Sure," I said. "He was killed by a bullet through the head. But if they're not careless, if they do a thorough autopsy, they'll find he had a stomach full of chloral hydrate, commonly known as knockout drops. Mr. Strickland drank a Mickey Finn out of his own flask."

"How do you know?"

"Deduction. Violet O'Hara drank from the same flask and fell asleep. Precisely as contrived—which gave the killer a chance to enter the room, shoot Strickland, impress Violet's fingerprints on the gun, and then fade. It almost worked, too. Except for one uncalculated hitch.

"Violet does not like liquor. So she took only a sip from the flask and woke up too soon. She recognized the picture and tried to rearrange it. But she was walking on eggs, panicky, and she planted the gun in the wrong hand."

Nola's palms pressed flat on the desk. "Whittle it down. Who?"

"Owen Lang," I said.

Ivy Strickland gasped. Her fingers were a bowknot of distress at her throat, and she stared at the accountant, appalled.

Lang stood rigid, trying to smile, if you can call the horrible distortion of his lips a smile.

"Untangle it, Jordan," Nola said.

"It figures. Balado wouldn't do it. He's crazy about Violet. He'd never frame her. Mrs. Strickland didn't do it. She was at an opera party. I didn't do it. So who's left. Only Lang."

"The motive?" Nola asked tightly.

I crossed two fingers. "Lang and Mrs. Strickland are like that. She had a boy friend. He's it. She was getting her divorce to marry him. But it's just as easy to marry a woman with money than one who's broke. She wouldn't get any settlement from her husband. He was almost stone broke. But she did stand to collect plenty if he died. And twice as much if he died the hard way. Only it would have to be done soon because after the divorce he would probably change his beneficiary."

Owen Lang laughed once, hoarsely. "The man's crazy."

"Am I? Who suggested that I reach the Boncourt at ten? You did, friend. But Violet got there at seven. You needed that interval to complete your operations. You knew exactly when she'd be there because you mounted and staged the whole production. And I was sucked into the deal, thinking it was on the level."

"Words," he cried. "Only words. You have no proof." He was clutching at straws, fighting a losing battle. He knew it and I knew it.

"We can get what proof we need I said. "We'll check the person who registered for the adjoining room at the Boncourt. I'll bet the handwriting is yours, even if the name isn't. You were in that room, waiting for the moment. You stuck a card between the door and the jamb and lifted the hook out of its eyelet. That's why you selected the Boncourt. You knew the setup and how easy it would be. Then you went in and did what you had to do.

"And there's the flask, too. It's missing. You didn't want the police to find it. I'll bet it's still hidden somewhere in your apartment. If that doesn't wrap it up, Nola can locate your source of chloral hydrate. And it was a stupid lie telling me Strickland and Miss O'Hara met weekly. You managed, somehow, this one and only rendezvous. You're sewed up tight, friend. You're hooked and you'll never wriggle off."

I guess he believed me. His head bowed down and he put his face in his fingers and began to tremble.

I turned around and went over to Balado, whose arm was over Violet O'Hara's shoulder.

"Everything's all right," I said. "Take her home, Ulpio. She's got a lot to forget."

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BURIAL AT DUSK

They planted him six feet under. Only then did his widow smile.

By ELSA BARKER

THE WOMAN let the man's sock she was mending fall to her lap when she heard the car turn into the driveway, but she didn't stir, even when she heard dragging steps on the walk.

She sucked in her breath when, through the window, she saw her husband's bloody, battered face. But her eyes showed only momentary shock, which faded quickly to her habitual expression of dull acceptance.

She had always been a quiet woman, and of late years she had

grown even more silent. She moved to the door and held it wide without speaking, while Lew Dunwoody helped her husband stagger inside and across the big farm kitchen to the couch under the south window.

"There's aspirin and whiskey in that cabinet over there, Lew," she said calmly.

She filled two pans with water, one warm, one cold, and gathered a small bundle of clean rags, which she put on a table by the couch.

"Did Tom Bagby do this?" From her tone she might have been asking about the weather.

Big Carl Eastland opened one swollen eye as he gulped down the whiskey. There had been a time when such a question from his wife might have embarrassed him, but these two knew each other too well now for there to be many secrets between them. He groaned and nodded.

"Where is Tom now? I'm surprised that he didn't finish the job while he was at it." Jenny Eastland's voice was cold, but her hands were gentle and efficient as she swabbed the bleeding cuts on Carl's face.

"Tom's in jail," Lew Dunwoody answered her, then added bluntly, "at least for tonight. Carl, why did you have to get frisky with Tom's wife? You knew how he always felt about Ella—and there's plenty of other women around."

Sudden color stained Jenny's pale cheeks, and for a moment her fingers faltered. Ten years ago Jenny had been a pretty girl, but marriage to handsome Carl Eastland had dimmed her luster. Her kindly gray eyes had acquired a scared rabbit way of sliding away from any direct glance. The once soft lips were drawn into a bitter line. Her shoulders drooped and her belly slumped. At twenty-nine, life had licked Jenny Eastland—life, or a faithless husband.

Now she said quietly: "This cut on the cheek will need some stitches, Lew. Will you phone and see if Dr. Saunders will come right away?"

When Lew Dunwoody had gone down the narrow, dark hall to where the crank telephone hung on the wall, Carl Eastland sat up. He took the damp rag out of his wife's hand and held it to his own cheek.

He groaned, with a sound that was like a sob.

"Tom's going to kill me, Jenny! He swore he would. He would have this time, only they dragged him off."

Jenny didn't look at him. After a moment she said slowly: "I suppose we could go away. You could use another name." She said it without conviction.

Carl shook his head. "That wouldn't do any good. Tom means to kill me, and he's not fooling! He swore he'd spend the rest of his life following me if I tried to hide. He

—he will, too, Jenny. What can I do? Help me, Jenny."

Jenny said nothing. Her expression of hopeless acceptance did not change. Carl caught her hand. He pulled her down on the couch beside him. He put his arm around her thin waist and pulled her close. "I wonder who told him about Ella and me? We were always careful. We—"

"Anyone could have told him," Jenny said quietly. "Everybody knew that black-haired baby wasn't his."

She sat within the circle of his arm, neither yielding nor resisting, a meek, rabbity little woman with all the spunk squeezed out of her. Carl gave that groaning sob again and drew his arm away. He put his head down in his hands.

"God! I don't know why I've been such a damn fool. Jenny—you'll stick with me, won't you?"

"I always have, haven't I?"

"You're the only one I could ever really trust, the only woman I ever really loved. You know that, don't you, Jenny?" He gulped. "God! I wouldn't hurt you for the world, Jenny. You've always understood how I am. You'll help me now, won't you? You'll try to think of some way—"

Lew Dunwoody came back into the room. He looked at them with embarrassment, then looked away.

"Doc Saunders will be right out," he said.

His eyes came back and lingered on Jenny for a moment. There was unspoken questioning in them, but Jenny sat stiffly beside her husband, her own eyes straight ahead. Presently she said in her soft, meek voice:

"If there was some way we could make Tom believe youre already dead, Carl. Then, like I said, we could go away. You could take another name."

When nobody said anything for a long moment, Jenny went on timidly: "I could buy a coffin from Lew. We could put a dummy in it, have some kind of a fake funeral. We could—"

"No good, Jenny," Lew shook his head. "You know how we do around here. The coffin always sets in the front parlor so friends can come and pay their respects. They'll expect to see the body. You put a dummy in the coffin and you'll have to close it, and they'll think it's mighty peculiar. Tom Bagby would think it suspicious."

"Yes, I reckon you're right, Lew," Jenny said hopelessly.

"By God, we *could* do it!" Carl Eastland said suddenly. He leaned forward, rinsed out the bloody rag and returned it to his face. The one good eye he turned on Jenny had a sparkle of excitement in it. "I knew I could count on you to think of something, honey!" What came through his swollen and bleeding lips was a distortion of his usually breezy smile. "We won't need a dummy! I'll get in the

damned coffin myself. Let them come and pay their last respects!"

"But, Carl! You just wouldn't look—"

"We'll get Doc Saunders to give me a shot, slow my pulse, put me to sleep. All docs have got stuff like that. You can fix up my face to look pale, draw the shades in the parlor. And you can sit by the coffin, Jenny, and cry so hard they'll be too embarrassed to stop."

Jenny gave him a quick, scared look. Her eyes slid away again.

"Oh, no, Carl! That's awful! I couldn't! You know how—"

"How the pallbearers always have the last look before the coffin is closed?" He turned his distorted grin on Dunwoody. "You got a big coffin, Lew?"

Lew nodded. "One big enough for a man seven feet tall and three feet wide. But—"

"Fine!" Carl got up and took a limping swing around the room, forgetting his bruises. There was a sort of macabre triumph in his laugh. "You know, this is going to be fun! Fool that damn Tom Bagby like nobody's business!"

"Please, Carl!" Jenny protested. "This is awful. We can think of some other way."

Carl laughed again.

And that, thought Jenny bitterly, watching him, *is the way he wooes his women. Resistance excites him. He sweeps it away like a whirlwind.*

"I'll die sometime tonight! Heart failure, after the beating that bastard gave me!" Carl went on excitedly. "Bury me tomorrow evening just at dusk. No fancy funeral. That big coffin will hold a lot of air and—Lew, you can even hide a blown-up inner tube in the coffin, where I can reach the valve. Then go ahead and bury me. As soon as the crowd leaves, after dark, you two come and dig me up. By morning I'll be long gone from here, with no danger of Bagby trying to follow me. It's my one sure chance to live!"

"No!" gasped Jenny.

Lew Dunwoody seemed to catch a spark of the big man's excitement. He lighted a cigarette and grinned.

"It's crazy, but I believe we could do it!" he exclaimed. "No inner tube, though. I'll fit your coffin with one of those little bitty oxygen tanks I carry in my ambulance. Press the valve when you need air. You can go right on breathing even six feet under. Maybe two little tanks, just in case. We can try it out tonight, unless you're scared it won't work."

"I'm a damn sight scareder of Tom Bagby," Carl declared. "Let's go!"

"No!" said Jenny, and for once her voice was firm and sharp. She looked almost angry and flags of color actually rosied her cheeks. "You're both crazy! You'd have to have Doctor Saunders' help. He'd

have to sign a death certificate. Doctors don't do things like that. Besides, it's—it's horrible!"

Lew blew a smoke ring at her, winked and smiled.

"I can make that old soak see reason," he said confidently. "I can threaten to tell Tom Bagby that Doc was drunk the night the baby was born. Ella had to have a Caesarian, and she might not have died if Doc's hand hadn't slipped. An undertaker sometimes learns things like that."

"Why, that's blackmail!" Jenny still sounded scared.

Lew smiled at her again. He patted her reassuringly on the shoulder. "We're not violating any law. We're just giving Carl his sure chance to live. You want that, dont' you?"

"Why, of course! I—listen! That must be Doctor Saunders' car now."

"You'd better lay down again, Carl," Lew advised. "And look sick, in case it's somebody else."

Jenny drew in a deep, quick breath. "I'm going to bed. I—I won't have anything to do with such a plan!"

JEANNY EASTLAND sat in a small, straight-backed rocker in the darkened room and rocked. Sometimes she pressed a sodden ball of handkerchief to her eyes, but mostly she just rocked, dull eyes straight ahead.

By eleven that morning the neighbors had started coming in, bringing gifts of flowers and food —pies, cakes, cookies, baked hams, fried chicken. They tiptoed quietly into the parlor, glanced briefly at the coffin, spoke to Jenny and tiptoed out again. Sometimes Jenny answered them. More often she gave no sign of even hearing.

Neighbor women gathered in the kitchen, drinking coffee and gossiping in low voices. A few men hung around, two or three on the front porch, talking crops and weather.

At noon Ada Carver brought Jenny a bowl of soup and a cup of tea.

"If I pull this little table up close, will you try to eat something, Jenny?"

Jenny turned a blank gaze on her for a moment.

"I don't want anything."

"But Jenny, you'll be sick. Try to drink the tea anyhow."

"Just leave me alone. That's all I want."

Ada looked at her helplessly and carried tea and soup back to the kitchen.

"Poor thing," she said softly. "She acts like she'd lost her mind. I'd never have dreamed she cared that much about Carl Eastland."

Young Louise Rudabaugh tossed her head. "She never had much mind to lose, if you ask me. Look at this house! I'll bet she hasn't bought a new rag or stick of furniture for it in all the time they've lived here. And the way she always looks and acts. Jenny's a rabbit. No wonder Carl let his eyes wander sometimes."

"More often than sometimes," Ada Carver said dryly.

The other women looked at her, remembering a time a few years back when gossip's tongues had wagged overtime about Ada Carver and Carl Eastland. Ada saw the look and flushed.

"I can remember when Jenny was the prettiest girl around. She had plenty of life and sparkle in those days. I'm more than sorry if I ever added any to her hurt."

"Nothing would have made any difference," Ada Carver said flatly. "Carl wouldn't have stayed home nights if he'd had a hundred wives and a thousand children."

Their voices had raised so that they could easily have carried into the little parlor where Jenny sat; but she gave no sign of hearing. The rocker went silently back and forth . . . back and forth.

IT WAS DARK, and the last car but one had finally left the yard. Jenny came out of her bedroom. She had combed her hair, put on rouge and lipstick. She carried her shoulders straight, and there was a sparkle in her eyes. She met Lew Dunwoody in the middle of the room. He put his arms around her and kissed her long and fervently.

"You were wonderful, Jenny! Just like a real actress!"

She laughed. "I was a little proud of myself." She drew back to look up at him. "Where is Doctor Saunders?"

"Drunk. Soaking drunk. The McDonalds are taking him home."

Jenny caught at his arms. "Is Doc drunk enough to talk?"

Lew shook his head. "Tom Bagby's with them. I don't think Doc will talk."

Jenny smiled with satisfaction. "I've made a lot of plans in my life, Lew but this is the first time anything ever worked out right."

"You're sure you won't regret it, Jenny?" Lew looked at his watch. "There's probably still time, if you want to dig him up."

Jenny shook her head. The smile was still there, but her eyes hardened.

"I've waited ten years for a chance like this," she said a little grimly. "Ever since Carl shamed me before everybody that first time with Ada Carver. He had some insurance, Lew, and I'll sell this farm. Then some day—before long—you and I can go away—together!"

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THE HOWLING TEENAGERS AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

VIOLENT DEATH hung in the morning air.

It rose with the mist over the great river that flowed past the shining white new city. The rumble in the distance grew louder, a sound like an express train moving closer. The police and the thin line of British-uniformed, American-armed troops were in their places around the perimeter of the airfield at the edge of the city in the morning sun.

The twin-engined aircraft circled the field once and prepared for the landing.

The distant rumble grew closer. The aircraft touched down. The morning mist began to burn off.

The police and soldiers lounged easily in their thin line, joked, pointed toward the approaching rumble that shook the ground, and laughed. They were not worried. This was Africa. The new Africa, but still Africa. The Zulus of Tcha-

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ka had roamed across this land, beating their *assegais* against their shields to frighten the enemy before they ever appeared to do battle with them.

The approaching mob was doing the same thing, and the police and soldiers were not frightened. They had been through this before. Only as a formality they held their weapons ready as the first of the mob advanced along the road from the city.

The twin-engined aircraft rolled to a stop and the door opened. A massive broad-shouldered man stepped out and stood at the head of the movable stairs. His white teeth flashed in the morning sun. He was taller than the nervous men around him, like some great Zulu chief himself.

At the edge of the field the first wave of the mob made contact with the police and troops. The police and troops held them back, smiling but striking out with clubs and gun butts where necessary. The troops and police smiled, because they had suddenly seen that the entire mob was made up of the young, the teenagers of this emerging new nation.

The tall, broad-shouldered man stepped down the movable stairway and reached the field itself. He

started across, his bodyguards trotting to keep up with him.

"Viva le Presidente!" voices shouted.

Suddenly, the mob seemed twice its size. The police stopped smiling. The soldiers battled. Howling, the mob of teenagers smashed through the thin line of guards. Sirens wailed in the distance as reinforcements approached for the police.

The mob did not wait. Roaring like wild animals, screaming, hysterical, they poured over the line of guards.

Engulfed by the wave of suddenly distorted faces, the sea of wild eyes, the police and troops had no chance. The teenagers swept across the open air field like the ancient Zulu warriors.

Alone and tall, the president of the new country stood in the center of the field.

His bodyguards, everything forgotten now but the safety of their chief, fired their machine-guns directly into the advancing mob. The first wave of the roaring mob went down. Blood spurted across the earth of the field. Screams of pain filled the air. Legs and arms kicked, writhed on the ground.

But the mob did not stop, did not pause, did not hesitate even one split second.

The bodyguards fired again, held down the triggers, the barrels of their sub-machine guns turning red.

The mob swept on.

Like the great ocean itself the mob of howling teenagers rolled across the field.

And then the mob passed on toward the distant edge of the open field and the dark jungle.

Behind them they left thirty of their own dead; they left a hundred wounded and writhing. They left the bodyguards trampled and groaning, the police and troops dazed and wounded. They left the twin-engined aircraft leaning crazily on one smashed wing.

And they left the tall president lying on his face, dead, with a long knife plunged into his back.

* * *

The Palladium in London rocked to the screams of the teenagers. On the lighted platform stage four young men sang, twisted, strummed guitars, banged the drums.

The young people screamed with delight. They laughed, clapped, sighed. Their bright young faces were excited with the beat of the music, the words of the singers.

One tall boy, his hair streaming out behind him, dove from the balcony. His bloody head lay smashed against a seat below.

* * *

In Sydney, Australia, the police answered a call. Citizens complained that there was a noisy party disturbing the peace. When the police arrived in the rich suburb all was silent. Cautiously the police approached the house. Inside, in the basement playroom, they found the

dead bodies of twenty-two teenagers.

"Poison?" the detective said. "All of them?"

"Every one. And self-inflicted without a doubt. They all have the glasses near them."

"Mass suicide?" the detective said, unbelieving, staring.

* * *

The laboratory lay in burned, smoldering ruins. Captain Parker of the Chicago police stood beside the director of the laboratory.

"They were picketing—nothing unusual," the director said. "They know we are working on military research. Peace groups often picket us."

"Then they went wild?" the captain of Chicago police said.

"All at once, just before quitting time, the twenty of them became two hundred, perhaps three hundred.

"They broke into the building and set it on fire."

"All teenagers? Every one?"

"All," the director said. "And the plans for the nuclear fuse are gone."

* * *

On a side street in the Soho section of London a mob of young people blocked the path of an armored car. The driver and two guards got out to clear them off. The driver and both guards died later of multiple injuries from their beating. Two million dollars in gold bullion vanished.

You may obtain The Man from U.N.C.L.E. at the newsstand where you purchased this magazine. Reserve your copy now!

* * *

The beach near Santa Barbara, California, was deserted when the sixteen boys and girls, all under eighteen years of age, walked into the sea and swam out of sight. They were never seen again.

"Like lemmings," the highway patrol officer said.

Bodies were washed ashore all week.

* * *

In Red Square, Moscow, the police failed to hold back the horde of long-haired youths when the deputy chief of security of the Polish Peoples Republic came to visit the tomb of Lenin. The police were reprimanded. The square was cleared by troops. Six of the teenagers died, and twenty went to prison.

But the deputy chief of security of the Polish Peoples Republic was dead.

Two

NAPOLEON SOLO looked deep into her eyes. Violet eyes, like deep, liquid marbles, pools of beauty. She was curled like a kitten at the end of a long, soft couch. Solo's smile was easy, youthful as he looked into those violet eyes.

"How do you do it, Maxine?" Solo whispered into her ear. "Be almost six feet tall and curl up into a powder puff—such a pretty powder puff?"

"Mirrors," Maxine Trent whispered back. "I do it all with mirrors."

"Not all with mirrors, I hope," Solo said softly.

"All, Napoleon Solo," she said. "I'm an illusion. I'm only a mirror myself. If you touch me, *poof!*"

Solo sighed. "The story of my life, *poof!*"

"Will you risk it? Touching me?" Maxine whispered.

"For you, I risk anything," Solo said.

"Go on! Go on!"

Solo leaned closer to her. The room—her room—was silent. The music that had been playing was gone now, the record player turning itself off automatically at just the right instant. Solo almost smiled; for his purposes he could not have done it better himself. A very cooperative record player.

Too cooperative?

The sixth sense, the warning, went off in his brain. The split-second sensitivity to danger, even to potential danger, that had kept him alive longer than any chief enforcement agent U.N.C.L.E. had ever had. Was it coincidence, the record player stopping at just the precise instant he was about to bend down and kiss her?

He leaned close to her, smiling, her perfume in his nostrils. His eyes looked into her eyes. Behind his boyish, ardent smile, his mind went to work. He ran Maxine Trent through his mind like a card through a computer: Age 24; 5 foot 11 inches and all the right measurements to go with the height; a runner-up for Miss America one year; daughter of industrialist Clark Trent; known to like action and—danger. Introduced to Solo two weeks ago by John Knox, a young business executive Solo cultivated to hide his true occupation.

His true occupation was chief enforcement agent for United Network Command for Law and Enforcement—U.N.C.L.E. And U.N.C.L.E. was a supra-national organization sworn to somehow keep the world safe and, if possible, sane. Any enemy of any peaceful and honest person in the world was the enemy of U.N.C.L.E. It was hard work, dangerous work.

Now Solo wondered if the danger were close here, in the arms of Maxine Trent.

"Well, Napoleon," Maxine said. "I heard you were a man of action. You don't call this action—yet?"

Solo smiled. "You'd be surprised, my dear."

He was about to say more when the signal went off. A low sound, rising and falling, like a miniature version of the wailing horn of a Parisian police car. Solo reached quickly into the inside pocket of his coat and switched off the signal on the miniature radio set.

Maxine blinked up at him from the couch as he stood up.

"You're not leaving—*now*?"

"I am afraid I am," Solo said. "A previous appointment, my little alarm reminded me. Some other time we can pick it up, yes?"

She stared at him. He was a slender man of medium height. He was neither handsome nor ugly. A pleasant, friendly face that was usually smiling. His dark, brooding eyes were at the same time quick and bright. Intense eyes, but not hard and not jaded. Eyes that smiled an apology to Maxine now, yet were already seeing something else.

He turned quickly and walked to the door. The speed of the motion gave a slight indication of the strong, trained athlete's body concealed in his slender frame. What he lacked in size he more than made up for in catlike speed, in

skill, and in training. He seemed no different from the thousands of young executives, budding doctors, youthful professional men, and wealthy, if idle, playboys. He could have been anything from a tennis bum to a first echelon government man.

Solo was none of those things. He was a man trained to kill with a single blow of his innocent-seeming hand.

Once in the corridor of Maxine Trent's apartment house, Solo turned quickly left and walked to the fire stairs. He went through the door and down and out into the midtown Manhattan street. It was

late afternoon, and the streets were crowded.

Solo walked a block, blended with the crowd. Only then did he take out his small chrome metal and plastic sender-receiver set.

He quickly raised the two threadlike antennae, pressed a button on the instrument that fitted in the palm of his hand, and spoke low into it.

"Napoleon Solo here."

"Report to Mr. Waverly at once. Code Mayday," the crisp female voice of the radio communications girl said.

Solo clicked off his set, returned it to his pocket, and began to walk casually but quickly across town toward the East River.

* * *

Illya Kuryakin ran his thin fingers through his thatch of unkempt blond hair. The small, thin Russian muttered to himself.

The private library was as quiet as a tomb. Kuryakin was one of the two persons in the small, book-lined room. The other was an old man whose clothes had seen better days, but whose thirst for knowledge was undiminished. From time to time the ancient female librarian came into the room. She glared at Illya, who she obviously considered far too young to be a scholar.

Illya smiled disarmingly at the harridan. With his blond, round-bowl haircut he looked like a mischievous Russian leprechaun; or a blond knight-errant, an impish modern-day Prince Valiant with straw hair. His bright and quick eyes danced beneath his seriously lowered brow. His glance at the old woman was quizzical and amused —an amusement that did not show on his face as he looked up at her.

"Can I help you, madam?" Illya said to the librarian.

"I— I—" the woman stammered, caught staring at Illya.

Illya spoke softly. "I understand. You are wondering what so young a man is doing in a library on such a fine day?"

"I—"

Illya smiled. "You are wondering why I am studying so obscure a book about poisons? You wonder am I a spy, since I obviously read a foreign language. Ah, that is suspect, eh? A young man who reads a foreign language must be a spy at least, *nyet?* Ah, the young people today, such irresponsible animals, *nicht wahr?"*

"I—" the librarian blustered, and then turned scarlet as this wisp of a boy suddenly reached out and pinched her.

"Why, you—!"

Illya laughed.

"Well!" the librarian snapped, turned and stalked off.

Illya smiled once more, and returned to his work. This library was one of his favorite places to spend an afternoon in New York. A private library devoted to strange, half-known poisons, mysteries of ancient witchcrafts and other su-

perstitions, all the half insane fears of the human mind. That was Illya's single purpose in his life—to try to dispel the insanity of man, to try to save the idiot world from itself.

For that purpose he had studied, learned fifteen languages, left the service of the country of his birth to work for what he truly considered the only sane group of people on earth—U.N.C.L.E.

For that purpose he still studied, trained his small but lithe body, devoted himself to the work. He had no interest in either command or position, only in doing the job better than anyone. He had no time for such rewards and frills of the world as money, honors, fine living, or creature comfort.

The signal on his transmitter-receiver went off. Instantly Illya became the quick, serious agent of U.N.C.L.E. The old librarian was looking around in fury for the source of the strange wailing sound. Illya shut off the signal, raised the small plastic and metal box to his lips.

"Kuryakin here."

"Mr. Waverly wants you at once. Code Mayday," the voice of the communications girl said.

Illya replaced the tiny radio set in his pocket, returned his book to the desk, smiled winningly at the ancient librarian.

"Take very good care of the books, *liebchen,*" he hissed at the old woman.

He could almost hear her red-faced anger behind him as he walked out and down to the late afternoon New York street. Smiling to himself at his own joke, he did not see the old man in the decrepit clothes move with far greater speed than he should have been capable of at his age. He did not see the old man follow him.

But he heard the footsteps behind him on the stairs.

He reached the street and for an instant was out of sight of the footsteps behind him. He reached into his jacket pocket for the tiny radio, raised the threadlike antennae, pressed the sending button.

"Sonny, this is Bubba. I have a bandit in tow. Plan 9."

Illya pressed his receive button. Instantly the tiny transmitter-receiver whispered low to him.

"Bubba from Sonny. Possible bandit here, too. Plan 9."

The voice of Solo faded. Illya walked on down the sunny street. In a store window he saw the figure of the old man behind him.

If you liked this preview as much as we did—a word of friendly advice. Run—not walk—to the newsstand where you bought this—and reserve your copy of U.N.C.L.E. now!

The Toadstool Pigeon

by ARTHUR PORGES

There are times when . . .
the very birds of the air
cry out against murder.

VICTOR ELIOT'S favorite color was green. Not the green of summer fields or sunlit ocean, but the exact hue, shade, and value of United States currency, particu-

larly in the larger denominations. It seemed to him that the green of a hundred dollar bill was distinctly superior in every possible way to the billious color of a mere ten-spot.

For money he would crawl, lie, cheat, steal, and, as it turned out, even kill. Because of it he became one of the elect—the inventor of a perfect murder scheme. There have probably been very few such, but no statistics are available, since by its very nature a really neat and undiscoverable killing has no official existence.

For years Victor had cadged from his circle of friends, a circumstance which eventually shrank the circle, in true mathematical fashion, to a single point. Now that point—Milt Sessions—had rebelled, too, and wouldn't part with a cent.

As for his relatives, only one of Victor's was worth tapping, and he already detested the nephew wished on him by an unkind fate. Uncle Simon Penfield was loaded, a widower with no children, and pushing sixty. Not once in his life had Victor ever pried a penny from him; the old man was too canny, and saw through his nephew as if the fellow were made of the best optical glass. In fact, Victor had just been advised, after making a recent request for a "loan," that Uncle Simon took such a dim view of him that his share of the old man's estate would be considerably less than that of the other nephews.

Before that he had merely resented and disliked Uncle Simon; now he began to hate him. What right did an old recluse have to horde a million dollars or more? It was of no use to him. All the fool cared for was mushrooms and toadstools and he'd spent years studying the unpleasant plants. And now he was favoring other nephews and nieces—a scrubby lot of dull, stupid nonentities, with platoons of spoiled kids—over the only brainy relation Uncle Simon had—Victor Eliot.

The idea of murdering Penfield, however, didn't enter Victor's mind until he was invited, grudgingly, he guessed, to attend Uncle Simon's sixtieth birthday party, at which the old man intended to announce the terms of his will.

Penfield lived alone on the family estate, in an old ramshackle house, twenty-eight miles from the nearest town by a dirt road that became impassable after any rain heavier than a drizzle. It was commonly believed that he would not leave it for the whole of Capri, Bermuda, or Santa Catalina Island as long as the place had fungi not to be found at those other, inferior, paradises. For Uncle Simon lived, breathed, thought—and ate—all but the poisonous species of that plant-family.

At the birthday dinner he made it quite clear, to Victor's consterna-

tion, that a private detective had been hired to investigate each of the potential heirs, and that the estate would be divided not equally, but in proportion to the merits of each of the relatives. The bequests, it turned out, ranged from a high of $250,000 (this fortunate niece had been lucky—or sly—enough to devote several years of her young life to making a collection of the fungi to be found growing on dead trees) to a low—Victor's share—of $50,000. He had been alloted that much, the old man pointed out sourly, only because blood was still thicker than water. He predicted openly that loose women and tight bookies would undoubtedly get it all in ninety days.

Victor was furious, but not to the point of refusing the money and storming out. Instead, he brooded internally on the obviously healthful effects of mushroom hunting and eating. Uncle Simon, at sixty, could pass for forty, and had a grip like that of a gorilla full of pep-pills. The fifty grand was not likely to reach Victor in a hurry, he reflected unhappily.

The next morning the old man took all his relatives on a fungus-tour of the three hundred acres. He told them more about mushrooms and toadstools than they cared to know, but all of them, except Victor, still sulking, showed great interest and enthusiasm.

But, oddly enough, only the outcast nephew saw the possibility in the situation. Here was a patch of edible fungi; there, another group of the deadly amanita. One of these last could kill you before a doctor came, Uncle Simon assured them. And yet the two kinds were far from dissimilar; many people who thought they were experts had been fooled—and had died. The old man then explained, exhaustively, exactly how to discriminate. And of all those watching and listening, only Victor Eliot concentrated on the lesson. Because in a sudden flash of inspiration he had conceived the perfect murder—one that would bring him fifty thousand lovely green dollars.

On his return home the next day Victor planned all the details. Uncle Simon was going to make a fatal mistake. Somehow—or so the coroner would be bound to conclude—the old boy would get one or two amanitas mixed with his edible mushrooms. Considering the deadly speed of the poison and the rough dirt road to the nearest doctor, it was most unlikely Simon could survive. The only visitor he ever had, according to his own account, was another hermit, only slightly less goofy than himself, who tamed wild animals, and always had a squirrel or bird on his shoulder or in his pocket. Ironically, Uncle Simon had referred to him as queer! He just wanders around the county, the old man had said, sleeping in the open, getting

handouts, and watching the wild life. Right now he has a crow that comes to his whistle. "Crazy way to live," Penfield had added, whereupon Victor almost choked.

When the old man died, Victor meant to be far away. It was bound to appear that Penfield caused his own death; the case of the overconfident expert.

It was clear to Victor that nobody could smuggle a toadstool into Simon's mushrooms; besides, that would be very risky. What if the sheriff found amanitas in those left, or if the coroner found remains in his uncle's stomach? No, Victor had a much better idea.

He bought a large veterinary hypodermic at a store far from his usual haunts, and returned, secretly, to his uncle's estate. There he put the old man's lesson to good use, gathering a dozen large amanita toadstools. Back home, he boiled these down and extracted a concentrated, highly poisonous liquid. Now came the beautiful and ingenious part of the plan. Uncle Simon knew his fungi, but never would he suspect that right in the largest patch of mushrooms—one that he meant to eat soon, he had explained—were a number that had been injected with deadly amanita extract. It was simple and foolproof. Simon would pick the things himself; Victor would be hundreds of miles away. The coroner would find toadstool poison in Penfield's stomach, and fresh residue of fungi. That was important, for if Simon died from eating old or dried plants it might be suspected that a relative had "salted" his stockpile. But with freshly picked mushrooms, nobody else could be involved. The expert had goofed, and that was that. Besides, Penfield had made it clear that he favored newly gathered plants, for only they had the real and subtle taste he loved. Rather than eat dried ones, he would do without his favorite food in winter.

There was an ideal period for injecting the harmless mushrooms. On the following Wednesday, Simon would be in San Francisco at a meeting of fellow amateur botanists—a fungus fandango, Victor termed it in silent derision, even as he prepared to profit by his uncle's rare departure from the estate.

Before leaving home, he bought a plane ticket for Spain. When Simon ate the deadly snack prepared for him, Victor meant to be thousands of miles away, forever free of suspicion. Not that any was likely to arise, but there was no harm in playing safe. Precaution was better than regret.

He drove to the Penfield estate, left the car hidden on the outskirts in a clump of trees, and headed directly to the area picked for salting. It was almost certain that Uncle Simon, on his return from San Francisco in the afternoon, would collect some of the fresh buttons growing there.

At first, Victor bungled the job. It seemed that only a small amount of liquid could be injected without distorting each fungus to a suspicious degree. He had to pull and throw away quite a few before the point came home to him. After that he learned to squeeze only a few drops into each mushroom. But a few drops would be sufficient. The stuff was terribly potent, according to Penfield, who ought to know.

Already fresh amanitas—the highly poisonous death-cups—were growing where he had gathered those for his own brew and unlike the edible kind, they didn't cluster. Each preferred its own little territory. Too nasty, Victor thought. They can't even stand each other.

But it was no time for philosophy. He must now dispose of the hypodermic, for it was the only link that tied him to the murder, and he wanted to get rid of it immediately. Pity it wasn't glass; he hadn't noticed until too late that it was a new-fangled type of plastic. No crushing it to fragments. Well, there was a deep ravine only a few yards away. It had rocks at the bottom, and, more important, was choked with great clumps of milk thistle, a weed with barbs so murderous that only a tank could penetrate such a thicket. With prints wiped off, the hypo could be lost down there for years.

He was reaching for his handkerchief to wipe the barrel, when a voice, high and raucous, exploded almost in his right ear. A stream of oaths—English, German, French, and Spanish—began the volley. Victor whirled, almost collapsing in his fright. The hypo fell from his hand, rolled to the edge of the ravine, and disappeared over the edge.

He looked about, bewildered, his heart pounding, but saw nobody. Then the voice came again, right over his head.

"The unexamined life is not worth living," it assured him.

He peered upwards, and there, on a branch of a tree, was a large, black bird. Cocking its head wisely, the crow said: "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?"

Victor felt a sudden surge of relief, followed by black rage. He stooped for a stone, but then another voice addressed him.

"You're trespassing, young feller. This is private property. It belongs to old man Penfield, and I wouldn't take any of those mushrooms. He favors them himself."

Victor gulped. The voice was like the drip of warm honey, but

the speaker was a huge man, shaggy as a bear, and dressed in a weird assortment of garments topped by a ratty, greenish ulster. His large eyes were a yellow-brown that was almost opalescent, and might have belonged to a faun—or Pan himself.

"All the way with LBJ!" the crow squawked, landing on his master's shoulder. Then it added: "In your heart you know he's right."

"You stop that, Caviare," the man said severely. "No radio talk. Besides, those aren't our politics."

"Keep cool with Coolidge," the bird said.

"That's a little better."

He held out a huge paw to Victor. "I'm Jeb Jackson. What I told you is true. This is private property."

Victor had no desire to identify himself as a nephew of the owner. He wanted no witness to his being here, especially under his right name.

"You're here," he said, instead of introducing himself.

"I have permission, Caviare and I—the only ones."

"Caviare?" Victor asked, stalling for time.

"Because he's black and salty. First I was going to call him 'Bubonic,' because he's a black plague, too. But that's a mean way to treat a dumb animal. Not that Caviare's dumb—far from it. He can cuss in six languages."

As if to prove his point, the crow began a long harangue in Latin.

"That's an old church recipe for driving out an evil spirit," Jackson said, pride in his voice. "Not many humans could recite it, I can tell you."

Time was being lost; Victor had a plane to catch. He longed to see what happened to the hypo, and sidled over to the ravine, talking as he went.

"I didn't intend to trespass, and I don't know one blamed mushroom from another. I'd be afraid to pick any."

Jackson nodded. "Should be; that's good sense. Those are deathcups—kill you in a flash. The ones over here are wonderful eating, though."

Victor looked down into the ravine, trying to make it appear a casual glance. There was no sign of the hypo. Undoubtedly it had rolled or slid into one of the thistle-clumps. Too bad it couldn't have been wiped free of prints—damn that bird! One minute alone, and he'd fix the black so-and-so for startling him at just the wrong moment. But since nobody would suspect murder, there would be no search for anything here. Hell, even if some hick sheriff guessed at homicide, he'd never think of a hypo. That was too far out and too ingenious—a typical Victor Eliot ploy. No, he'd figure somebody put amanitas in Uncle Si-

mon's stew, and how could Victor do that from Spain?

"I'm leaving now," he told the hermit. "My name, by the way, is Miller—Harvey Miller. Glad to meet you; but I have to hurry. I'm catching a plane."

"A plane is determined by three points," the crow said, and Jeb grinned, showing large, shining teeth.

"I studied some geometry, and recited the lessons to him. Wouldn't be surprised if he could prove Pythagoras' theorem."

"So long," Victor mumbled, and fled.

Once on the plane, he began to relax. First of all, there was almost no chance that murder would be suspected. Secondly, even if by some mischance foul play was assumed, the method was too subtle to be imagined. Finally, the presence of a Harvey Miller need not involve a nephew in Spain at the time of Simon Penfield's death. Nobody would search the ravine for evidence of a nature wholly unknown; and whoever did would be unable to penetrate the spiny thistles. Maybe, by spending a fortune, they could get a bulldozer from town, twenty-eight miles away, but who would bother? So Victor sat back, forgetting that he'd be almost broke in Spain. It didn't worry him, for money would soon come his way—fifty thousand dollars worth of the stuff.

There was, of course, no way to keep tabs in Spain—not without arousing suspicion later. So he stayed two weeks, until his money was gone, and came back. Once at home, it didn't take him long to learn that Uncle Simon was indeed dead—from eating toadstools by mistake, it was believed. Jeb Jackson had found him in the last throes, too far gone to be saved, and recognized the symptoms. He'd done his best, with a mustard emetic, but Penfield had died.

"I did it!" Victor told himself, in glee. "A perfect murder—one for the book." A book never to be published or read, was an obvious inference. "It's going to be a green Christmas—fifty grand green!"

He got a terrible shock when the police came for him, but didn't panic. There was no proof—couldn't be. He said as much on the way to headquarters.

"Know a fellow named Jeb Jackson?" the lieutenant asked him gently.

"Never heard—wait. My Uncle Simon mentioned a goofy hermit in the area. I think that Jackson was the name."

"But you never met him?"

"No."

"Hmph!" the cop said, and after that refused to add another word.

But in an interrogation room, they brought Victor face-to-face with the big, shaggy hermit, still wearing his mouldy green ulster over a suede jacket, twill pants, and Hawaiian shirt, once loud

enough to be heard over the roar of Niagara, but now faded to a murmur.

"That's the fellow," Jeb said, in his low, sweet voice. "Called himself Miller." He turned his huge, flaring eyes on Victor, and reproached him. "You shouldn't have poisoned that nice old man. How could you do such a miserable thing?"

"I never saw this guy before," Victor said firmly. "He must be crazy! Of course, he is; just look at him, for God's sake. Besides, I was in Spain when Uncle Simon gathered those mushrooms. Apparently he just got careless. If anybody put toadstools in with his mushrooms, it wasn't me. You check with Transocean Airlines."

"Nobody put toadstools in his mushrooms; Penfield would spot them at a glance," the lieutenant said. "The killer used a hypo. He probably crushed and juiced some amanitas, and then squirted poison into the mushrooms while they were growing. It was damned clever—up to that point. We'd never have guessed in a million years. Jackson found Penfield dying, and thought the symptoms looked like amanita poisoning. The autopsy confirmed that, and since Jeb actually was there when the old man picked 'em—the eating ones—it didn't make sense, unless Penfield goofed for once."

"That's what happened," Victor said. "I never owned a hypo, and wouldn't know one end from another."

"Then I wonder how your prints got on this one," the cop said, taking the thing from a drawer in the table. "Washington verified them from Army records."

Victor gaped at the shining instrument. It certainly looked like the one. His stomach became an acid sponge burning into his vitals.

"Wha-a—where—?"

"Jeb's pet crow," the detective said. "They love glittering things, you know—take 'em to the nest, usually. But this bird brings such

stuff to Jackson. Jeb saw a connection. A new hypo; Penfield dead of a poison he wasn't likely to eat by mistake; a stranger in the area. So he came to us. Very stupid of you, Eliot, after such careful planning otherwise. I mean the prints. You should have wiped 'em off, and then buried the thing a foot deep. He shook his head as if actually disappointed.

Victor thought of the deep ravine, the milk thistles, many eight feet high, and terribly armed. A great spot for discouraging human snoopers, but with a damned bird that could fly right down—a gabby, nosy crow with an eye for baubles—what was the use? The whole universe was irrational to the core.

In a grating voice he uttered several words so pungent, incandescent, and new that the lieutenant actually blushed.

Immediately, from the room outside, a high, raucous speaker echoed them with glee.

"You shouldn't have said that," Jeb told him mournfully. "I was hoping to reform that back-sliding bird."

"Let's go," the cop said. Dumbly, Victor followed him. As they entered the outer room, Caviare fluttered down to his master's shoulder, and said: "Fiat justicia, ruat coelum."

"Hey," Jeb exclaimed, in delight. "That's good. It means," he said, turning to Victor, " 'Let justice be done though the heavens fall.' Imagine a crow talking such sense!"

"You go to hell!" Victor said bitterly. "You and that black stool pigeon!"

"I think," the lieutenant quipped, "it's more of a toadstood pigeon."

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(Continued from Page 54)
they were filled with canned food.

He came back to Maria, eyes gleaming with triumph. "You see? It's all right now! Food, heat, everything we need. Listen, you go get into that bed."

Billy motioned his pistol toward the bedroom, and she moved weakly in, removed her wet shoes, stockings, then her dress. She got into the bed. And he paced around the living room, feeling the elation. When he went in to the bedroom to look at her lying there, even her coughing did not irritate him.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"Yes," she managed.

Moments later he brought her a tin of corned beef, crackers and a can of fruit juice. "There's soup too. Cans of it. I'll heat some for you. And you're going to be fine."

She nodded and ate hungrily, and he went outside again. He carefully examined the way they'd come in. Then he opened a shutter on the side of the cabin facing that way. He returned inside and propped the door shut with a chair.

He went back to the bedroom. "Do you want some of that soup now?"

"No, Billy," she said in a small tired voice.

"Oh, they thought they were going to get us, didn't they?"

"Billy, we can't stay here forever. I'm so tired, and hot. I've got a fever, I think. My throat's terribly sore. And I ache all over."

He stared at her, anger pouring through him again. "What's the matter with this place anyway? You're in bed, aren't you? It's warm now, isn't it? You've eaten, haven't you? What the hell's the matter with you? If you think—"

"Please, Billy. Don't."

He fought his fury. Then finally he bent down beside her, laughing softly. "You're just tired, that's all. Don't you worry. Everything's going to be fine. Sleep now. When you wake up, you'll feel great. I promise!"

"But they're looking for us up here now, Billy. They'll find us, sooner or later."

"No!" he said. His face froze. Then he laughed again. "I've got it figured out, see? If we make it until tonight, then it'll be all right." He nodded positively. "You go to sleep. And don't worry about a thing."

He returned to the living room and sat down beside the window where he'd opened the shutter. He looked through the trees toward the small path they'd used to get here. He did have it figured out, he thought—as long as they didn't find this place today. But if they did—

He checked again to make sure he'd fully reloaded the pistol after they'd come out of that stream. He had. He removed his shoes to let them dry in front of a nearby heater. Then he put the pistol, safety off, in his lap. He leaned back,

eyes bright and wary, watching. No, he thought, he didn't want anyone coming up here now. But if someone did—

The winter day faded into a brief twilight, then darkness came swiftly, stopping the search. The sheriff said, "That's all we can do until tomorrow." Mrs. Nivero, the strain showing in her face, walked back to the camper. Carl Miter said, "We'll just lay over right here, then." The sheriff looked at Ernie Lang. "You look pretty tired, Mr. Lang. Get some sleep."

Ernie nodded. "We'll drive back to Tahoe and get a motel. When it's daylight—"

"Yes," the sheriff said. "We'll go at it again."

Ernie got into his station wagon and drove slowly out of the area. "Ernie," Anna said, "maybe they'll just give up tomorrow. They can't last in this cold."

"Yes," he said without convincement. "And then?"

"I know he's done wrong, but—"

"We've got to face it, Anna. He's my son, and he's yours too, because you tried to make him that. But we can't forgive him forever. We've got to understand what it is he's gotten to be." His jaw muscles hardened. "He's a killer, Anna, a killer."

LIGHTS from the lodge, which had been opened on the sheriff's request, gleamed softly above the lake. Two patrol cars were parked in front of it, and the overnight detail was inside. There was another car at the mouth of the road leading into Fallen Leaf, where a deputy sat watching the road. Nearer the water, down from the lodge, Carl Miter's camper caught the reflection of a rising quarter moon. He sat on a back step of the entrance to the sleeping quarters inside.

Miter said quietly, "I remember when I got that red dog. He was two months old. Got him from Jerry Koonz. Jerry said he was out of the best pointer stock he ever seen, and I paid a hundred and seventy-five dollars for him." He touched the brim of his hat. "But I used him for everything. Birds. Rabbits. Coons. Coyotes. Everything."

"I'm sorry, Carl," Elizabeth Nivero said from the bunk inside the truck. "It was a nice dog."

Miter stared into the darkness of the trees beyond. His rifle was propped against the truck beside him. "You wouldn't want some coffee, would you? I could go up there to the lodge. They probably got some going."

"No, thank you, Carl."

Miter listened for any sound at all. There was none except the distant roar of the falls. Almost all of the animals had left this high altitude when the cold had come, he knew, and they wouldn't come back until spring. He touched his

hat again and thought of how that dog had looked with the blood flowing out of its chest. The anger simmered inside of him.

Then he thought of the girl out there somewhere. She didn't even have a sweater, as far as they knew. *That bastard,* he thought; *he's killing her.* And, he guessed, Elizabeth must be thinking about that right now too. He tried to reassure her, saying:

"I wouldn't worry too much, Elizabeth. That's a funny thing to say, everything considered. But they maybe found some place to keep warm. Too many cabins around here to check in one day. And if they didn't, this cold's going to bring them in anyway. You could look at it that way."

"She didn't do it, Carl," Mrs. Nivero said thinly.

"Do what, Elizabeth?"

"Marry him because she wanted to."

"Well, you're probably right about that."

"I know that! He threatened her, Carl. That's the only reason!"

She said no more after that, and he sat, not minding the cold because the fury inside of him was enough to warm him. Where is he? he thought, putting a hand against the chilled steel of his rifle. *Where is he?*

MOVING down from the small cabin at the edge of the wilderness, Billy Lang went into the water of the small stream. He came out just above the falls, and climbed over rock, then through brush, without sound, until he had reached the edge of the lake. He stopped there, in the protection of the trees, and looked across at the lights showing from the lodge. Then he saw the soft gleaming of the camper's housing below the lodge. His eyes narrowed. His heart began pounding faster.

But he forced himself to go on with what he had to do. He moved away from the direction of the lodge and the camper, along the lake. He'd been certain he'd seen it when he and Maria had circled around this way, escaping from Miter. But in the dim moonlight he could not see it. He began to lose confidence swiftly, as he moved. Then, at last, he saw it in the water, floating motionlessly: a small rowboat.

He looked back toward the lodge. It would be hard to see him from there. But maybe they had others posted along the lake. His mouth felt dry, suddenly imagining dozen of eyes watching him. The bitter cold even seemed to reduce in intensity, as nervous perspiration beaded on his forehead. Then he fought off the fear, knowing that he had to do this.

Cautiously, he went down to the edge of the water. He pulled the rope holding the boat and brought it in toward him, inchingly. When he had, he removed his shoes and lay down in the boat. He untied the rope. Then, using his hands as paddles, working slowly, the cold of the water making his hands stiff, he moved the boat out onto the smooth water.

He took it out seventy-five yards, trembling now. Then he brought his hands out of the water and tried to move his fingers. When he could, he drew out the slip of paper he'd written on before he'd left the cabin, and put it on the bottom of the boat. Then he took from a trouser pocket Maria's dress. He put that on top of the note.

Finally he removed his shirt, trembling even more with his upper body protected only by a T shirt now. He put that with the dress. Then, holding his breath, he went over the side, into the icy darkness of the water.

He swam hard underwater, feeling the cold beginning to numb

him all over. He surfaced, certain now that he was not going to make it, then dove again, forcing himself to swim, until, finally, he felt the rocks against his feet. He came out of the water slowly, shaking badly now, and picked up his shoes. He moved on with them, back into the trees, and tried to get the shoes on. It took a long time against his stiff hands and shaking, but he did it; then he went back in the direction from where he'd come. He reentered the stream where he'd come out of it, and waded again through the icy cold water.

He'd begun crying now, with the cold—shivering and crying, feeling the tears freezing against his cheeks. But he kept going, leaving the water, and walking back up that small trail until he reached the cabin. He went inside, where the red coils of the heaters waited. He couldn't stop crying, and he could hear Maria saying, "Billy?"

He stripped off all of his clothes and knelt before a heater, rubbing himself and sobbing. Finally he felt the hurt of the warmth. Then that began to disappear. He stood up and stumbled toward the bedroom. He switched on a light in there. He was still crying, but suddenly that turned into laughing. He stood, eyes wildly bright, wearing no clothes, his laughter rising. And she lay watching him, her body tensing with fear, the fright showing plainly in her young eyes.

THE SEARCH resumed at daylight. Ernie Lang got out of his car and walked to Carl Miter's camper. He did not look at Elizabeth Nivero. He said to Miter, "When you were working your dogs yesterday, how far up and down that stream did you go?"

"You figured he went into the water?"

"He might have, to cover the trail. He knew you had the dogs."

"I figured all of that, Lang," Miter said. "I went up two hundred yards on that stream, then down past the falls, all the way to the lake. Those dogs didn't pick up a thing."

"How good are they?"

Miter's eyes shifted angrily. "How good do you want a dog?"

There was a call from a deputy standing near the lake. He pointed toward the boat floating beyond. Ernie and Miter went down to the water, and the sheriff emerged from his car to join them. The deputy said, "That boat was tied up yesterday. I'm sure of it."

"Might just have come free," the sheriff said. "Floated out there."

"Might have," the deputy said. "But that lake's been smooth as glass all night."

"All right," the sheriff said. "There're a couple of boats stored in back of the lodge. Let's get one of them down here and take a look."

A boat was brought down and

slipped into the water. Two deputies stroked it across the lake to where the other boat floated. Minutes later, both boats were beached, and the dress, shirt and note were handed out. The sheriff read the note aloud in a grim voice:

"You who find this, tell them we'll never be caught. Come to God, if you want to find us now. Or to the bottom of this lake . . . Billy Lang."

The sheriff looked first at Elizabeth Nivero, then at Ernie Lang.

"No," Mrs. Nivero said. "No!" Her voice rang over the water, and she thrust a hand at the note. Then her knees buckled.

Carl Miter caught her and, despite his small size, lifted her easily. She was moaning now, and he said, "I'll take her back over to the truck." He moved off with her, carefully, gently.

Ernie, mind stunned, watched them. Anna, beside him, took his hand. Then he looked at the sheriff, blinking.

The sheriff shook his head apologetically. "I don't know, Mr. Lang. I don't know."

Ernie stared at the dress, then at the shirt. "Maybe they really didn't do it," he said.

"Maybe not," the sheriff said. "But he was running into nowhere. If the girl loved him that much—"

"Yes," Ernie said, still stunned. "Yes."

"We'll get some people in to search the lake. But it's deep. It could take a long time, and we still might not find anything." He shook his head again. "I'll keep some of my men searching around here, just in case. I'm sorry, Mr. Lang." Ernie, his wife beside him, walked slowly back to his car.

They sat for a long time, saying nothing. Then finally he said, "Is he really gone, Anna? In that water?"

"If he is," she said hollowly, "even that would be better to know."

"It was a terrible thing," he said. "I couldn't think anything at first, then suddenly I was glad. Because it was over!"

"Ernie—"

He laughed bitterly, eyes stinging. "Christ, but man is an animal, isn't he?"

"No, Ernie," she said. "Much more."

He crossed his arms against the steering wheel and leaned his head against them. Finally he said, "No."

Anna watched him and saw him straighten.

"No!" he said again. "I told you last night, there's no use hiding from anything any more. I don't think he killed himself and took that girl with him."

"Why, Ernie?"

His voice was cold: "Because I don't think he'd have the guts." He turned and met her eyes. "He's tricked his way around everything

else in this world. Maybe this is another one. Maybe he's still out there, somewhere. I'm going to find him, if he is."

She waited until finally he said:

"I taught him how to live outside, Anna. He never cared about that, but he learned anyway. Maybe he's found a place further away than we've looked. A cave. Or may he built a lean-to. Because if it's a trick, he's got to wait it out now." He nodded, face stonelike. "If he's alive, I'm going to find him, Anna. And stop him, once and for all."

He removed his pistol from where he'd placed it on a rear seat, and slipped it under his belt beneath his jacket. Then he got out and walked grimly in the direction of the falls beyond.

As he did, Carl Miter saw him moving away from the area. He said to Mr. Nivero lying inside the camper, "Elizabeth, you're going to be all right now, aren't you?"

She lay staring at the ceiling of the housing. She didn't answer.

"Elizabeth," he said, "I've got to leave you here now, and you just try not to think about anything." He reached inside and patted her hand, then, his pistol strapped at his waist, he left the camper.

Ernie Lang was well ahead now, walking up the road toward those falls, but Carl Miter followed swiftly.

The road passing the falls rose steeply, made a half circle around the rushing water, then followed the stream, which flowed below. The road had once been blacktopped for a stretch of perhaps a half mile, but that was cracked and broken now. Ernie examined the rushing water as he moved upstream. He'd asked Miter how far up he'd taken his dogs, and Miter had said two hundred yards.

All right, he thought; maybe Billy went further, knowing Miter had his dogs. Maybe he kept himself and the girl in that freezing water for a long time, just the way he might have swam that lake last night, because he was tenacious and shrewd and because he was never going to give up until he was stopped. And if he had done these things, and if he were still alive, he was going to be stopped!

Ernie reached a grey-timber bridge built over concrete supports which spanned the stream. There was a small lake just beyond the bridge, which fed the stream. Ahead, the road narrowed and swung past the lake, then rose toward the wilderness beyond. Hopeless, he thought. They could have gone anywhere. Anywhere—

Then he saw, where the road narrowed into a trail, a piece of white cloth. He went forward and picked it up. It was a handkerchief, small, with lace edges; there was an old-English M embroidered on one corner.

He looked upward, where the trail wound higher into the moun-

tains. He thought, then, he heard something moving behind him. He whirled, hand on his pistol, but he could see nothing. The woods were silent, with only the sound of the stream running under the bridge behind him.

He turned back toward the trail and moved on, putting the handkerchief in a pocket. The climb became steeper. He went past a fallen yellow tree, its bark and branches stripped. He climbed past marsh-like grass, and then trail narrowed to a very small path. Where it did, he saw a woman's comb. He picked it up. He looked around, through the trees, and then saw the cabin resting a hundred yards beyond, barely visible.

Ernie Lang started through the brush toward the cabin, moving low, keeping himself out of sight. Twenty-five yards from the structure, using the brush as a screen, he saw that the front windows were shuttered, except for one.

He pulled his pistol from his belt again, then started making a slow, careful circle of the house. He found all of the other windows shuttered and the back door closed. He came out of the protection of the brush and ran to the back of the cabin. There was a meter near the corner. It was turning.

He took a long breath, then he moved silently along the wall to the back door. There, he stopped and listened, hearing nothing but his own heart beating for a few seconds. Then he heard voices. First the girl's, very faint. Then the other one, growing louder. He knew that voice. He licked his lips, then called:

"Billy!"

The voices stopped. There was not another sound. Three seconds went by. Four. Then a gun exploded inside the house. A bullet ripped through the door. He heard a scream of rage, as he slammed back against the wall.

"Billy!" he called again, and another bullet tore through the door.

He pressed against the wall beside the door, and now he was certain that he could hear running through the house, then the door in front slamming open.

He kicked at the back door. It flew open, tumbling the chair that had propped it acoss the floor, and he went in fast. He saw the front door was open. He could hear the sound of crashing through the brush beyond. He went through the house, pausing only long enough to see the girl in the bedroom, her face drawn and white, eyes staring at him in terror. Then he ran outside in time to see his son scrambling upward along a grey-granite cliff. He plunged after him. And when the boy had nearly reached the top he shouted, "Far enough, Billy!"

The boy turned, his back against the rock. His eyes were wild, his face twisted. "No!" he screamed.

He pointed his gun at Ernie and fired.

The bullet whined past Ernie's left arm, ricocheted, and screamed through the air.

"Billy!" he shouted. "Listen to me!"

"Damn you!" the boy howled, and suddenly he was coming back down, firing his pistol. Ernie dropped flat, bullets skipping into the rock on either side of him. He stared at his son descending, the gun kicking in the boy's hand. Then he lifted his own pistol, sighted and fired.

The gun flew out of the boy's hand as his arm jerked outward. The impact of the bullet half-turned him. The boy fell to one knee, staring at Ernie with savage hatred. He put one hand to the blood coming out of his chest and fell to his side. He still watched Ernie Lang, mouth moving silently.

Ernie ran to him. "Billy—"

"Damn you!" the boy whispered, then he rolled back, to lie with his eyes open, quite dead.

Ernie knelt beside him. He touched the boy's cheek with a trembling hand, eyes stinging again. "God," he whispered. Then he staggered away. He put a hand against a tree trunk to steady himself, and was sick; and then finally he turned around to look again at the boy lying there.

He did not hear Carl Miter approaching, until he'd stepped directly in front of him, grinning. "Yeah," Miter said. "I lost you there at that house. Then that kid came flying out. I didn't even have time to get off a good shot, before you got in the way. But you took care of him real good—"

Ernie Lang swung with a burst of vicious strength, knocking the other man rolling in the brush. Miter came to his feet immediately, spraddle-legged, brushing a hand along his chin. "Now, wait a minute, mister—"

Then Ernie Lang's strength disappeared, and he slipped to his knees. "Get the sheriff," he said raggedly. "For God's sake, just get the sheriff."

Miter stared at him for a few moments, then he said, "Is the girl in the house?"

"Yes."

Miter nodded, then turned to look at the fallen boy again. His mouth twitched at the corners with a smile. "All right, Lang," he said to Ernie. "You get yourself up and take a look at her. I'll get the sheriff."

They carried the girl to Fallen Leaf Lake by stretcher, where an ambulance and doctor were waiting. A deputy was left beside Billy's body, and the stretcher was carried back for him.

"We'll take care of all of it, Mr. Lang," the sheriff said quietly. "You've been through enough. Go back to that motel and get some rest. We'll need your statement. But that can wait."

Ernie nodded wearily. Anna stood beside him. He looked across the grounds in front of the lodge at the ambulance parked near Carl Miter's camper. The doctor was examining the girl there.

"We'd better see how she is," he said.

"Yes," Anna said.

They walked across to the ambulance. Carl Miter, standing beside the camper, looking at Ernie Lang coolly, then sat down on the lower rear step. Elizabeth Nivero came out of the back of the ambulance. There was life in her face and eyes again. She walked toward them briskly and said, "We're going to take Maria down to Carson City. There's a hospital there. She's got a fever, and she's been very ill. But she'll be all right."

She stared at Ernie Lang with steady eyes. "She doesn't blame you for anything, Mr. Lang. She was afraid. She dropped that handkerchief and comb you found on purpose. He threatened her, just before you got there. He told her if he couldn't have her, nobody else would. He might have killed her, if you hadn't found them. I don't blame you either. For anything. You did what you had to do. I'm glad you did."

Ernie met her stare for a moment longer, then he turned and walked with Anna back to their car. The ambulance pulled away, as they got in. He watched it leaving along the narrow road, followed by the camper.

"Ernie," Anna said softly, "I wish to God it could have been another way. But it wasn't. And she was right. You did what you had to do."

He looked at her and found something in her eyes that he'd never seen before. And he felt something in himself for her that he'd never felt before. Something gained, he thought, and something lost.

"You have to believe that Ernie," she said.

"Yes," he said. But he knew, despite the absolute reasonability of it, that it would take a lifetime to do it.

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